

2018

Middle School Teachers' Perceptions About Reading Achievement

Brenielle Williams
Walden University

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Walden University

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Brenielle Williams

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Walden University
2018

Abstract

Middle School Teachers' Perceptions About Reading Achievement

by

Brenielle Williams

Ed.S, Walden University, 2012

MA, Ashford University, 2010

BS, Jackson State University, 2009

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

October 2018

Abstract

Reading skills assessments have demonstrated that middle-grade Mississippi school children are on average two full grade levels or more below grade reading levels. This qualitative case study in one urban county Mississippi school district with decreasing literacy scores examined teachers' perceptions of evidence-based literacy instruction methods, which may improve literacy problem in this district. The constructive learning theory provided the conceptual framework for this study. The research questions addressed teacher perceptions regarding recommended instructional strategies, limiting factors in student literacy, and suggestions about improving literacy teaching. Ten middle-grade teachers from 3 district schools participated in semi-structured interviews on research-based instructional strategies, methods, and curriculum materials. Data from interviews and observations of teacher meetings were coded and analyzed thematically. Key findings included a lack of teacher knowledge about some evidence-based literacy instruction methods and uncertainty about the evidence supporting instructional methods. Administrative issues also emerged that impeded literacy instruction. The outcome of this study was a presentation to district administrators and a 3-day professional development (PD) program for teachers, with content tailored to address the needs of teachers in the 3 schools. This study fills a gap in the literature regarding the classroom use of evidence-based practices in schools with struggling students. The study provides a blueprint to help teachers improve their literacy instruction competency and ultimately improve the literacy skills of the students in this district.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Dan and Brenda Teacher, my brothers, Dandrick and Dan Jr., my grandparents, Will and Roxie Williams, my deceased paternal grandparents, Clyde and Willie Mae Teacher, and my deceased cousin, who was like the sister I never had, Shamekia Teacher Ellis. I thank you for all your unconditional love, encouragement, and support through this tedious doctoral journey. You were always so understanding, especially when I was extremely frustrated and overwhelmed. You cheered me on every step of the way, and I am eternally grateful for my support group. Dad and Mom, you were always so willing to just listen and to allow me to vent after countless hours of writing and working with very little rest. You always believed in me, and words will never be able to explain what that means to me. Dandrick, my twin, you have listened to never-ending conversations throughout the years about this dissertation. Each time, you would always give me an analogy about not giving up that lifted my spirits, and I thank you for the encouragement. DJ, after twenty years, I could not believe we were getting a baby brother. As your big sister, I hope that I have made you proud, and I hope that you will never give up on your dreams, because the sky is the limit. Grandma and Grandad, you always told me to look to God, and reach my destiny. Thank you so much for your support and encouragement and for being the pioneers of our family. Granny, I know you are having a praise party in heaven along with Pig, Tee, and Mekia. To be the first Dr. in our family, I am filled with humility, and I know that you are proud of me. From the top of my heart, I thank each of you who has supported me throughout this journey. I love you all.

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Finally, I give all the glory, honor, and praise to God. I magnify God for being constant in my life. Thank you, Jesus, for never leaving me, and for giving me the strength to endure something I never thought I would accomplish. Psalms 27: 13-14 states, "I had fainted, unless I had believed to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait on the Lord: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart:

wait, I say, on the Lord.” Thank you, God, for your grace and mercy, and for allowing me to complete this prestigious milestone.

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Section 1: The Problem

Introduction

The Mississippi ReportCard (MS ReportCard), an annual assessment of school districts in the state of Mississippi, reported the vast majority of students in public schools in this state struggled with basic reading skills (MS ReportCard, 2012, 2012a). For that reason, Edwards (2013) determined that mastering literacy skills for these students requires explicit instruction in the classroom. One public school district in a southern state faces a problem regarding how to increase reading test scores and academic achievement of its students. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2015) declared this public school district a “D” district, the equivalent of a grade of “poor”, and the district is on academic watch by the State Department of Education. The NCES (2015) found only 23% of the schools in the district have a majority of their students reading at grade level. Further, the average literacy level of students is 50% below grade level. This research uses a case study approach to address this reading problem in order to explore teachers’ perceptions regarding reading strategies, research-based instructional strategies, skills, methods, and curriculum recommended by the district for reading.

Annual measurable objectives (AMOs) are standards that students must master that particular year, and results from the annual student achievement scores for this district show a breakdown of the district’s yearly scores for the last 3 years. In addition, AMOs help define the district’s annual target for the next 3 years. In this case, AMOs decreased annually by more than 2% in language arts. Consequently, student mastery for the academic year is decreasing. Over 200 students took the annually mandated student

achievement tests in the field of language arts (MS ReportCard, 2012a). However, only seven students scored *advanced* (the highest score on the spectrum), and 39 students scored *proficient* (the second highest score). Thus, only the scores of these 46 students counted toward AMOs because the overall school score does not include student scores of *minimal* and *necessary*, which correlate to student achievement at or below acceptable ranges. The results of the Mississippi Curriculum Test show that district reading proficiency is 50% below grade level. This district has a significant deficit in reading comprehension (MS ReportCard,2012).

Definition of the Problem

A full 50% of the students in this study site were below grade level in literacy scores on their achievement tests. In this study, the researcher explored this reading problem using a qualitative case study, examining teachers' perceptions regarding reading strategies, research-based instructional strategies, skills, methods, and curriculum recommended by the district for reading. Defining teachers' perceptions about reading strategies, research-based instructional strategies, skills, methods, and curriculum might allow for the development of a project that would address what teachers believe they need in order to improve reading summative assessment scores, thus closing the achievement gap. When students are fluent in reading and comprehend information, they score higher on literacy exams (Edwards, 2013). In addition, students who received vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency instruction tended to do better on literacy achievement tests (Edwards, 2013). Wilson (2011) examined elementary students who lacked grade level literacy skills in the classroom and found they had difficulties trying to

grasp this material. This study examines the problem of low reading levels in one specific district.

Rationale

In this case study, I explored teachers' perceptions of reading strategies, research-based instructional strategies, skills, methods, and curriculum recommended by the district for reading. Carver (2016) suggested that technology integration will increase reading summative assessment scores and close the achievement gap. Wilson (2011) suggested that if literacy skills were supplemented with phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, and comprehension, then reading levels would increase. Subsequently, this would cause students' standardized test scores to also increase. Edwards (2013) agreed that implementing these basic research-based instructional strategies in the classroom effectively would improve students' standardized test scores in reading. Wilson (2011) proposed that literacy skills are an issue only for students who are reading below grade level. Such students need assistance with improving literacy skills as well as improving summative assessment scores. The superintendent of the district, teachers, and faculty deem low reading achievement to be a problem. At a recent conference with teachers from the entire district, the superintendent said: "I am tired of being a D district in reading scores. It's time to be an A."

I chose this project genre specifically because I had a great interest in comprehending how teachers' perceptions about reading strategies, research-based instructional strategies, skills, methods, and curriculum might allow for the development of a project that addressed what teachers believed they needed to improve reading summative assessment scores and close the achievement gap. That interest defined the

intentions underlying this study. Thus, the purpose and intent of this case study was to explore teachers' perceptions regarding reading strategies, research-based instructional strategies, skills, methods, and curriculum recommended by the district to understand why reading scores are consistently low. The goal of this research was to create a better understanding of reading strategies, research-based instructional strategies, skills, methods, and curricula that could result in more effective teaching and increase reading summative assessment scores and thus close the achievement gap. This research applied a qualitative research design that involved multiple interviews. I used an established qualitative analysis software package, NVivo, to analyze those interviews and develop the findings of this study.

Evidence of the Problem at the Local Level

Kelly et al. (2013) reported that the Mississippi student achievement scores were 10% below the national rating for language arts. Students take the Mississippi Curriculum Test, Second Edition (MCT2) every year, but the testing organization does not break down results specifically by individual school districts. This report, however, demonstrated that this state as a whole is behind in language arts and reading. The test revealed that a majority of the sixth and eighth grade students are not reading at grade level, scoring at least two grade levels behind in reading. Therefore, students and teachers need assistance to enable needed increases in literacy skills to close the achievement gap. Guzeller (2012) believed that incorporating reading strategies may be useful in helping students not only develop basic skills in language arts but also become lifelong learners.

The NCES (2014) suggested that insufficient funding in schools for language arts departments results in a lack of the resources needed to increase research-based

instructional strategies, reading strategies, skills, and methods. The Dallas Independent School District used 56% of its federal money on instructional expenditures each year (Ortlieb, 2013). In addition, 49% of the instructional budget was for compensatory services and remediation courses. Staff support, however, was only 11% of the total rankings from state, federal, and local governments. This district used approximately the same amount of monies allocated toward educational expenditures as in Ortlieb's Texas and the scores remained the same, just as they did in the Dallas study. No study has yet determined the effectiveness of this urban Mississippi school district's budget for research-based instructional strategies (MS ReportCard, 2014). No study has addressed the issue of whether research-based instructional strategies, skills, and teachers help implement those methods appropriately. Funds allocated for remediation, curriculum, and instruction to enhance the curriculum for learning is imperative (NCES, 2013).

There has not been a major improvement in literacy skills across the nation in recent years (MS ReportCard, 2014). This issue is much bigger than the classroom because researchers and teachers believe that literacy starts at home (Guzeller, 2012). Guzeller (2012) suggested that students who fail to read fluently will struggle in and outside of the classroom. Students' lack of literacy skills may also generate problems within the community. Because the reading skills are not improving, dropout rates may possibly increase. This could potentially affect communities in a negative way. Many students may not be able to obtain gainful employment because of their lack of reading skills (Guzeller, 2012).

At the study site, which is an urban middle school, literacy scores are at the bottom for the district. Literacy scores have decreased 10% in the county each term from

2012 to 2014 (MS ReportCard, 2014). The school in this county counters the reading problem by developing multiple plans to facilitate basic reading skills. For example, teachers are required to use 30 minutes of their planning block to remediate students whose reading scores are at the first, second, or third grade level. Another plan the county plans to facilitate is hiring a consultant group who will coteach with middle school reading teachers to improve reading skills during large and small group instruction. This case study clarified teachers' perceptions about the consistency of the implementation of research-based instructional strategies for the district. Findings from this study may result in the creation of a developmental plan to determine why scores are not increasing after the incorporation of consulting co-teachers for reading skills. Through this case study, I will more clearly understand teachers' perceptions regarding reading strategies, research-based instructional strategies, skills, methods, and curriculum recommended by the district for reading. Table 1 illustrates the depth of the problem at the study site, noting that standardized reading scores for 2012-2014 have been significantly below national averages.

Table 1

Mississippi Curriculum Test, Second Edition Standardized Reading Scores for 2012–2014

| Year | Scores at the Urban Middle School * | National Reading Scores |
|------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 2012 | 254/500 | 264/500 |
| 2013 | 209/500 | 221/500 |
| 2014 | 199/500 | n/a |

Note. (a) NCES (2015); (b) D. Kelly et al. (2013).

*Mississippi Curriculum Test, Second Edition (MCT2).

A major concern addressed in this study was students' inability to read. However, despite failing scores, students generally receive promotions to the next grade level. New research-based interventions, strategies, and technological advances may help close the achievement gap between students in grades far above their reading skill levels. MS ReportCard (2012) suggested that some computer-based literacy programs would help struggling readers improve skills in components of reading including phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency. Struggling readers need additional help in attaining basic reading skills (MS ReportCard, 2012). Because reading achievement is a problem in this district, a close examination with a case study design will help understand this problem further. District curriculum guidelines, interviews, and minutes from team meetings constituted the data collected in this study to determine teachers' perceptions related to recommended reading strategies, research-based instructional strategies, skills, and methods. Analyzing data obtained from this case study assisted in the development of a plan to improve the students' reading level from minimal to proficient. This study is beneficial to students, parents, educators, and community leaders by helping to develop students' reading skills within the district. Data from the MS ReportCard (2012) suggested that it is necessary to revise reading interventions and strategies to alleviate the deficit areas of fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary. Based on MS ReportCard (2012), this district's three middle schools are failing schools. Kelly et al. (2013) reported reading achievement scores for this district to receive a mean scaled reading achievement test score of 256, considered a poor mean achievement score. The scale score is vital because it shows that students are scoring just half of what they should

be scoring on these reading tests. It is important to carefully examine teachers' perceptions regarding why students are scoring low on tests.

At the local level, the district allocates a certain amount of money for technology, computer assisted instruction, and general technology supplies. The School District of Jackson spent \$18,317.76 during the 2014-2015 fiscal school year on computer assisted instruction (School District of Jackson, 2015). Computer assisted instruction includes general supplies for computers, tablets, and computer programs for reading classes. A report from the School District of Jackson (2015) also allocated \$38,212.38 for furniture and other equipment related to technology. The authors of this report recommended the Jackson urban schools purchase computer software for reading classes like Renaissance Learning. In the 2014-2015 fiscal year, the School District of Jackson (2015) allocated \$3,485,767.10 for technology usage in the classrooms. Subsequently, during the 2015-2016 fiscal year, the School District of Jackson allocated \$3,151,559.84 for technology usage in the classrooms. Thus, teachers at this school have a plethora of technology to implement into instruction.

Evidence of the Problem from the Professional Literature

Lawmakers argue that if a student cannot read on grade level in the third grade, he or she should receive a promotion or stay at their current grade level (McKenney & Voogt, 2012). Hutchison and Reinking (2011) examined students' perspective on their success in reading and whether they believed that reading was beneficial for them in the future. In addition, Hutchison and Reinking compared reading achievement between students promoted to the next grade, regardless of their reading skills, and those held back a year. Hutchison and Reinking concluded that students held back had an extra year

of reading fundamental skills. With the additional training, the study showed that students' reading skills increased. It is important to note that students found reading beneficial, and at times, they enjoyed reading. Reinking (2012) theorized that it is imperative to make reading fun and engaging, which traditional teaching techniques generally do not do.

The gap in practice demonstrates the importance of examining teachers' perceptions of these issues. Students struggling with basic reading skills and achieving grade level scores on reading tests may find assistance with developing their reading skills through research-based instructional strategies. Therefore, academic achievement in literacy classrooms is an essential skill that requires attention, and underlying fundamental reading skills require the use of research-based instructional strategies and skills to maximize student achievement.

For that reason, teachers need a variety of innovative models to reach students who are not learning basic reading skills from age appropriate materials. Because reading is the foundation for all other learning, it is essential that students enhance their reading skills. The population of this particular middle school consists of 605 sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade students (MS ReportCard, 2012). Currently, 96% of the population receives free or reduced-fee lunch, 88% perform below grade level (designated *non-proficient* on state reading achievement scores), and 87% live in poverty. The school consists of a 97% minority population (African Americans: 95%; Hispanic: 5%), and 55% of the students have received classification as exceptional education students, a euphemism for students with learning disabilities.

At the national and local levels, reading scores and literacy skills are lacking and many educators acknowledge this is a massive problem. Kelly et al. (2013) completed an international assessment of student achievement in reading, mathematics, and science that showed reading scores declined in U.S. schools compared with Brazilian schools. In the 2012 Program for International Student Achievement (PISA) ranking of 15-year-old student reading achievement in 65 different nations, the United States average literacy score was below the overall average in reading, and ranked 35th overall, lower than nearly all European nations (Kelly et al, 2013). In Brazil, which was leading the world in reading, teachers shared their insight on how they actively incorporated strategies into their lessons. The study revealed that sometimes the students were more excited about reading with the use of technology, such as reading e-books on tablets, compared with traditional methods like reading in a circle with a teacher.

The goal of this current study was to explore teachers' perceptions regarding reading strategies, research-based instructional strategies, skills, methods, and curricula recommended by the district to understand why reading scores are consistently low in these schools. Some teachers incorporate certain reading strategies that may not improve reading achievement test scores. For example, all reading teachers in the seventh grade used rereading as a strategy, that is, reading a text multiple times, to help students comprehend the information (Youngs, 2013). When teachers included both rereading and summarization, that is, pausing regularly to summarize the text just read, Youngs (2013) found that student literacy scores did not improve. Youngs (2013) suggested that if students double checked their work and had a better understanding of vocabulary, they might improve their reading achievement scores and become more proficient readers.

When Youngs (2013) then added vocabulary enhancement to the reading instruction strategies, student reading achievement scores improved significantly.

Definitions

Constructivism: In the context of a theory of learning, an instructional process in which teachers encouraged students to construct their understanding and knowledge of the world through experiences and reflection on those experiences. It can also refer to meaningful engagement between student learners that gives the students the ability to construct, analyze, and discover learning in a vital way (Yilmaz, 2011).

Exceptional students: Those who experience difficulties in learning as well as those whose performance is so superior that modifications in curriculum and instruction are necessary to help them fulfill their potential (Alnahdi, 2014).

Literacy: The ability to read and write or competency of knowledge in a specified area (Hannon, 2012).

Literacy skills: The skills needed for reading and writing. They include awareness of the sounds of language, knowledge of print, relationship between letters and sounds, vocabulary, spelling, and comprehension (Hannon, 2012).

Reading scores: In the context of this study, this term refers to the student achievement test scores from the annual, state-mandated reading achievement tests.

Struggling readers: Students who miscomprehend the reading process and have not put together a reading system that helps them construct meaning (Ortlieb, 2013).

Technology: The branch of knowledge that deals with the creation and use of technical means and their interrelation with life, society, and the environment, drawing upon such subjects as reading, math, science, and the arts (Means, 2010).

Significance

This case study was significant because it sought to explore the perceptions of how middle school teachers in a district with students who struggle with reading literacy regard reading strategies, research-based instructional strategies, skills, methods, and curriculum recommended by the district for reading. These perceptions provided clues to understand how teacher understanding and use of reading instruction strategies affected student reading achievement scores. Thus, teacher perceptions regarding literacy interventions in classrooms provided an understanding of why reading scores are low. Furthermore, this study was significant because it offered direction for the development of purposeful professional development (PD) to enhance teachers' understanding of literacy instructional strategies and the benefits of working collaboratively. Such a PD program could change instructional practices for reading and thus improve annual state mandated reading achievement test scores for students in this district. Furthermore, teachers' participation in such a PD program could develop their understanding of how literacy skills, such as phonics and phonemic awareness, aid improvements in students' reading achievement scores (Conner, 2014). Teachers must understand the basics of literacy before they can move toward increasing reading achievement test scores. This study is pivotal because content knowledge of both reading and understanding are essential for effective literacy instruction.

Conceptual Framework

Almost 50% of students in public schools struggled with reading skills (MS ReportCard, 2014). Teachers used reading strategies to help students improve their reading skills. Typically, such strategies consisted of a set of steps used by good readers

to assist them in comprehension of texts, and included actions such as rereading texts, stopping to summarize, pausing to ask questions about texts just read, and many others. By teaching struggling readers these strategies, teachers hoped to help struggling readers become good readers.

In order for any student in a school to improve their reading skills, they must possess a good understanding of the language in use. Additionally, they need necessary foundational skills for reading strategies. In addition, Guzeller (2012) concluded that students who struggle with reading skills in classrooms end up having communication problems in the future.

Moreover, the perception of teachers regarding reading strategies is that they should understand how to instill reading skills in students. These strategies and skills are important in improving literacy levels among the students. Carver (2016) suggested that introduction of technology for middle level students in schools will help in improving the skills for students thus closing the achievement gap of literacy levels.

Guiding Research Questions

This proposed qualitative study sought to understand teachers' perceptions regarding reading strategies, research-based instructional strategies, skills, and methods recommended by the district for reading. Reading strategies, research-based instructional strategies, skills, and methods are meant to increase reading summative assessment scores and close the achievement gap. The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What are teachers' perceptions regarding recommended research-based instructional strategies related to reading achievement?

RQ2: What are teachers' perceptions regarding what is limiting reading achievement?

RQ3: What are teachers' perceptions regarding reading strategies implemented to improve academic achievement in reading classrooms?

RQ4: What are teachers' suggestions to improve reading achievement?

Review of the Literature

Teaching reading in the 21st century is a difficult task for teachers striving to create effective lifelong learners Guzeller (2012). This current study was an exploration of teachers' perceptions regarding reading strategies, research-based instructional strategies, skills, methods, and curricula recommended by the district. The current researcher accessed several databases, including ERIC, ProQuest, Sage Premier, ProQuest Central, and Academic Search Complete through the Research Library. The search terms included: *Reading, reading comprehension, fluency, technology, technology with instruction, reading strategies, middle school, test scores, technology with facilitation, and reading with technological programs*. The researcher also accessed the NCES website for information on a national level and consulted books that discussed reading with technology as well as articles focused on using technology in classrooms and whether teachers used it effectively with instruction. Subheadings related to reading strategies and academic achievement provide organizational guides to this literature review.

Theoretical Framework

Constructivism provides the theoretical foundation of this study. Yilmaz (2011) defined constructivism as a learning theory that asserts a meaningful engagement of learners with experiences provides students with the ability to construct, analyze, and discover knowledge in a vital way. The constructive learning style gives students the opportunity to explore knowledge on their own. Constructivist theorists believe that giving students opportunities to explore research-based instructional strategies will inevitably increase literacy scores on student reading achievement tests.

This theory suggested that an effective incorporation of research-based instructional strategies generated literacy learning and improved reading achievement test scores. Schlinger (2010) suggested that constructivism was essential to literacy understanding in students because language and language arts created a verbal environment that students could and should explore to gain knowledge. Lamanuskas (2010) believed that if students did not understand basic concepts, more complex ideas would not be understandable. In this perspective, children learned better through various types of interactions (Lamanuskas, 2010). Cognitive development was pivotal, and Walker (2012) reported that students learned better when they had prior knowledge about a concept and could build upon that information.

In this current study, the conceptual framework of constructivism provided assistance in the analysis of data related to teachers' perceptions of current reading and research-based instructional strategies and methods recommended by the district. The framework was helpful in identifying emerging themes in the data. Initial coding and

determination of themes required inductive data analysis, which allows the research findings to emerge from the themes and concepts identified in the data collected.

The constructivist theory supported the concept that active engagement in educational opportunities and environments assisted students to construct their own meaning of learning based on their prior knowledge and experiences (Lamanauskas, 2010). In a constructivist classroom, students' learning styles affected choices that teachers made, and students learned through a variety of activities that included discovery, investigation, and problem solving. With this, reading became a social activity that increased the support from students to play a major role in their learning opportunities.

Reading Strategies

The literature review identified current trends in reading instruction and the effect of these trends on student learning. This researcher also learned about reading programs used on computers, strategies, and skills that may affect reading scores on reading achievement tests. Understanding the problem and strategies others used to address the problem helped develop a plan of improvement. Finally, the methodology of this study received rationalization from other studies associated with reading.

Guzeller (2012) studied the relationship between literacy and literacy skills in middle school students (grades 6, 7, and 8). When teachers incorporate research-based strategies into instruction, student reading levels as measured in annual achievement tests improved. Guzeller concluded that the integration of research-based instructional strategies might increase reading summative assessment scores and close the achievement gap. McKenney and Voogt (2012) suggested that students exposed to research-based

instructional strategies and apply that knowledge perform better academically because they can read and understand fluently. It is essential to build reading skills so that each student will be proficient in literacy skills.

To help students grasp reading skills more sufficiently, schools needed to provide innovative lessons and hands-on experiences. Hands-on experiences consistently used in the classroom encourage students to perform better (McKenney & Voogt, 2012). At the local level, the reading achievement tests had transitioned from paper-based format to a computer-based test. Therefore, incorporating research-based instructional strategies in technology classes in the curriculum could help increase students' literacy achievement. Further, teaching phonics, phonemic awareness, reading comprehension, and fluency skills combined increased student achievement (McKenney & Voogt, 2012).

Academic Achievement

MS ReportCard (2012) revealed that students with low reading levels were far below standards, and that many fundamental reading skills needed better development in the classroom. Uccelli, Galloway, Kim, Barr, and the Society for Research on Educational Effectiveness (2015) suggested that it was important to determine if the dramatic decline in literacy achievement can improve if literacy basics were integrated in the classroom across multiple subjects. Educators should also investigate which research-based instructional strategies can improve students' literacy skills and test scores. Ciampa (2012) asserted that demonstrating and modeling basic reading skills in the classroom improved students' reading achievement, which may improve dropout rates and help students become successful and positive members of society. Ciampa (2012) further

suggested that educators would feel more confident after they received professional training in how to develop quality instruction.

In the district of this current study, 55% of the students have disabilities (MS ReportCard, 2012); therefore, achieving basic reading skills is very important to this community. A variety of learning strategies could help improve the learning process. In addition, communities must become active participants with the schools, and all stakeholders, including teachers, administrators, board of education, parents and the community, must understand the importance of research-based instructional strategies (Ciampa, 2012).

There exists a problem with lack of literacy skills in schools across the United States. Reading instruction plays a vital role in schools, but the resources needed for effective teachers and materials are often not available (Gaothobogwe, 2012). Such resources included texts, computer-based literacy programs, professional development training for the teachers, or other key supplies. Gaothobogwe (2012) believed that effective instruction in reading would increase students' achievement. Furthermore, Gaothobogwe suggested that implementing literacy skills in every subject area was an effective way to improve test scores and acquire positive results.

Literacy Skills

Literacy skills, such as fluency and comprehension, are declining across the nation. Floyd and Judge (2012) examined how students' literacy skills nationwide were spiraling downward. In their findings, the authors determined that students did not comprehend the information they were reading because the vocabulary in the reading selections was too demanding. Sexton, Hignite, Margavio, and Margavio (2009) stated

mastery of the Common Core Standards was achievable with the incorporation of vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency in the classroom. Wendt (2013) found that the general curriculum and traditional learning made the integration of certain skills simpler by incorporating the use of vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency in the classroom daily. As a result, student's literacy skills increased. McArthur & Castles (2013) suggested teachers should use a variety of learning methods and research-based instructional strategies to incorporate literacy strategies into the classroom. Biancarosa and Griffith (2012) also examined ways to help increase literacy skills and concluded that literacy scores improved by incorporating more vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency lessons. Wendt (2013) reported that educators still had high expectations and also believed that incorporating research-based instructional strategies in the middle school classroom would increase literacy skills.

American schools are struggling, especially in the area of literacy, and academic achievement levels must increase if students are to succeed in life (Hignite, Margavio & Margavio, 2009). Because academic achievement levels played an important role in success, Hignite et al. (2009) examined how students responded to a computer-based test rather than a traditional paper-based test. The results showed that the computer-based test scores rose over the course of a year, and that the students enjoyed a computer-based test more than paper-based tests.

Clearly, if students were to be successful in middle school, and throughout life, they needed to be effective readers. Blachowicz et al. (2009) conducted a qualitative study that focused on using supported instruction for teaching literacy skills. Supported instruction included phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, and comprehension. The

results of the study indicated that when teachers provided direct instruction on literacy skills, including awareness of the sounds of language, knowledge of print, relationship between letters and sounds, vocabulary, spelling, fluency, and comprehension, the students' reading scores increased (Hannon, 2012).

Students achievement improved in the classroom when they believed they could attain the educational goal (Hignite et al., 2009). Confidence was an enormous boost to learning and general success. Without a foundational mastery of basic reading skills, students suffered from a lack of confidence. When the student mastered the reading objectives, they achieved improved reading levels. Although literacy skills helped students achieve their goals, Blachowicz et al. (2009) showed that schools struggled to incorporate literacy skills instruction across the curriculum. Administrators argued that teachers were not integrating resources effectively because of a lack of knowledge of how to incorporate literacy skills. In addition, some teachers were set in their traditional ways and were apprehensive about using different research-based strategies in their classrooms. Therefore, academic achievement in literacy classes continued to suffer (Blachowicz et al., 2009).

Ciampa (2012) examined how a lack of encouragement to read impacted literacy and whether retaining information improved. The results of the study showed that 40% of students did enjoy reading, yet comprehension levels were only 22%. This was no surprise, students who did not enjoy reading were not fully engaged and thus were less likely to read voluntarily or to succeed at it. In another study, Ciampa (2012) found that reading software programs were paramount to increasing motivation to read and literacy academic achievement in the classroom and on standardized tests. The study explored

how a reading software program, *Study Island*, helped students reading fluency. The students' willingness to stay in the program for the required 25 sessions assisted their success as they improved their ability to read with fluency and comprehend the required materials (Ciampa, 2012).

Richards-Tutor, Baker, Gersten, Baker, & Smith (2016) suggested that the United States moved toward understanding reading more in the twenty-first century. These authors acknowledged that many teachers had unique ways of developing reading skills, developing reading skills and understanding how to increase academic performance. Some of these unique techniques included reinforcing standards, giving immediate feedback to the learner, and developing a positive attitude toward subjects that illustrated ideas in a virtual world.

Guzeller (2012) examined the significant role research-based instructional strategies play in students' lives at an early age. They reported that students who read more often at an early age were able to grasp concepts better. McManis and Gunnewig (2012) suggested that research-based instructional strategies helped students at an early age acquire important literacy skills, such as phonics and phonemic awareness. Students listened to various programs online to hear the words, spell them out, and play games to reinforce the concepts taught. Therefore, many teachers in early childhood classrooms learned to teach the required materials for reading classes using various research-based instructional strategies like phonics. Guzeller (2012) examined the relationship between research-based instructional strategies and students' performance in the classroom and identified factors that directly increased literacy scores more than 55%. Based on the

reports, these techniques included phonics, blending, phonemic awareness, and increased vocabulary.

Ciampa (2012) suggested that reading in the twenty-first century required different teaching methods because the demand for success is much greater. The organization What Works Clearinghouse (2010) acknowledged that reading was a demanding skill, and in order to be fluent, students needed literacy skills and core competencies including a strong vocabulary, phonic ability, phonemic awareness, and phoneme blending. Ciampa (2012) suggested that teachers were unclear of what instructional strategies worked best, but they tried to develop students' phonemic awareness skills to increase literacy scores. The authors further pointed out that it was important for teachers to use the most effective methods to create engaging and motivating lessons. Students also learned better when they read texts that they found interesting (What Works Clearinghouse, 2010).

Incorporating research-based strategies into literacy courses was a major challenge. Given that teachers' perceptions affected which strategies they actually incorporated in the classroom, it was a challenge to implement new techniques. It was frustrating to learn that teachers refused to incorporate effective techniques because some did not like to change their routine (Carver, 2016). As a result, Carver concluded that teachers must learn to get out of their comfort zone. Carver (2016) also pinpointed the importance of professional development. The study examined teachers who were not aware of which techniques were useful because they did not attend professional development on a regular basis. As a result, professional development was essential to enable educators to adjust their teaching beliefs (Carver, 2016).

Biancarosa and Griffith (2012) examined how teachers conceptualized research-based strategies rather than forcing them into the already overcrowded educational arena. They suggested that students would show improvements in the standardized test scores if students learned literacy skills earlier. Teachers were more enthusiastic about incorporating research-based strategies into literacy courses when the proper resources were available to make the transitions smooth, reducing distraction and time invested in learning how to teach with new concepts (Floyd & Judge, 2012). Teachers could learn these research-based strategies and incorporate them into their teaching style by frequently attending professional development sessions and developing professional learning communities (Carver, 2016).

Technology Integration

Computer literacy was an important topic beyond the standard knowledge of incorporating literacy into the classroom. Computer literacy was correlated with reading literacy because it engaged students in the learning process (Al-Hazza & Lucking, 2012). Al-Hazza and Lucking (2012) examined whether student achievement was correlated to computer usage time. Student achievement scores increased at least one level to proficient with greater computer usage, a statistically significant result (Al-Hazza & Lucking, 2012). As a result, the authors suggested that teachers should increase computer skills to give students a holistic approach to learning, and ultimately increasing literacy scores.

In another study, Sexton et al. (2009) analyzed the effectiveness of reading literacy and computer literacy to determine student achievement and whether it was useful information in reading classrooms. The authors organized an examination of the

Information Computer Technology (ICT) courses to determine the relationship between online courses and reading literacy. They found that integrating technology effectively into middle school classrooms significantly increased literacy scores. The study also emphasized the importance of the administrative team understanding how to incorporate technology effectively. As Al-Hazza and Lucking (2012) emphasized, digital literacy was more than just reading and writing in the twenty-first century. The authors examined students from ages 7-10 and observed how they reacted during reading lessons. They found that students were more engaged when technology was involved. Al-Hazza and Lucking (2012) showed that the use of technology in the classroom significantly correlated with mastery of the technology and student achievement. The study concluded that reading scores increased when teachers used technology to enhance their reading lessons. Consistently, Means (2010) also found that computer literacy could boost reading literacy skills. The author observed that when teachers incorporated reading songs and poems from tablets and computers after reading a story, the students seemed more apt to learn.

As more students with learning disabilities entered general classrooms, teachers could no longer rely on traditional teaching styles. Instead, they needed to create more engaging experiences that connected with multiple learning styles. Floyd and Judge (2012) presented an acceptability model for students with disabilities. The authors examined reading disabilities to determine the efficiency of the acceptability model and reading comprehension levels. They measured the students' academic achievements by analyzing literacy test scores. Those scores resulted in sorting students in various reading intervention classes based on their achievement on those tests. They found that when

students were diligent about learning certain reading skills, they achieved successful mastery. The authors concluded that technology is beneficial to students with learning disabilities in acquiring reading skills.

Cawthon, Beretvas, Kaye, and Lockhart (2012) studied a group of students with a reading disability to examine the impact of research-based strategies on the learning process. They found a significant increase in basic literacy skills at the end of the semester compared with traditional strategies. Thus, students with learning disabilities tended to learn literacy skills better with the help of research-based strategies. These findings demonstrated a need to revamp the literacy classrooms through the use of research-based strategies to enhance students' academic achievement.

Sprietsma (2012) also demonstrated the effectiveness of research-based strategies in the classroom. The findings showed student achievement improved over consecutive semesters. The students in this study ranged from the third to fifth grade. The author examined the effectiveness of teachers incorporating small and large group instruction, peer reading, partner reading, and reciprocal teaching before reading, during reading, and after reading. After this year and a half study, the author found that these research-based strategies were effective with student discussion following the strategy.

Taken together, McKenney and Voogt (2012) and Sprietsma (2012) studies showed the benefits of incorporating research-based strategies in literacy classrooms. They should help policymakers better understand how to improve learning environments and improve teacher training. However, McKenney and Voogt (2012) noted that demonstrating that strategies were effective was only the first step. There were major roadblocks to actually incorporating these teaching techniques into schools. Funding

seemed to be a major hurdle for school districts with budgets that might not cover costs of computers and other technology tools. Sprietsma (2012) suggested in addition, changing teacher perceptions was a massive undertaking that no one seemed to have answer for. Policy changes could affect improvements, but without enforcement those policies became only suggestions.

McKenney and Voogt (2012) pointed out that although education has made positive strides toward incorporating research-based strategies to increase academic achievement in literacy, the struggle is still ongoing. The good news was that access to resources across the nation increased since the 1990s. Nevertheless, the challenge of improving reading deficits was an ongoing issue that educational lawmakers and teachers continued to explore (McKenney and Voogt, 2012). Indeed, choosing innovative ways to revamp the literacy department was challenging for educators (Ercegovac 2012). Still, teachers were trying to make their classrooms more research-based and advanced to increase students' academic achievement in literacy.

In addition to reading deficits, twenty-first century learners were dealing with changes to the educational system (Sprietsma, 2012). Today's classrooms were more virtual and interactive with the use of technology. The author suggested students also affected the educational environment with cell phones for example, using applications on phones and tablets to complete lessons. Teachers affected the system by incorporating SMART response systems to input homework and receive immediate feedback. Sprietsma (2012) stated that research showed that making reading exciting in the classroom created meaningful learning experiences for students. This was intuitive in that enjoyment of an event created more engagement and learning improved. Literacy scores

increased when learning was fun and exciting. Sprietsma (2012) examined instructional materials to confirm they aligned with research-based strategies. The author reviewed textbooks, manipulatives, pamphlets, notebooks, and graphic organizers to determine alignment with the language arts framework. They found that instructional materials corresponded to the rigor on the assessments.

Evaluating research-based programs and traditional literacy programs helped develop and improve students' literacy skills. Guzeller (2012) proposed that students learned far less through traditional methods when compared with modern research-based strategies. Means (2010) conducted interviews and documented observations of how research-based programs improved student learning gains. The study examined several elementary schools that used research-based programs in after-school tutorial sessions. They found that student learning increased on posttest assessments after with the incorporation of research-based programs like teacher clarity, classroom discussion, and feedback. Sylvester and Greenidge (2010) observed that when the teachers used programs in the classroom without any instruction, the literacy scores decreased. The authors observed several sixth-grade reading classes that allowed students to discover reading literature themselves. The findings of the study supposed that when teachers acted as facilitator only for reading assignments, literacy scores decreased.

The research findings showed that there was a difference between non-research-based programs and educational research-based programs. Means (2010) reported that although non-research-based programs were very meaningful to the literacy environment, educational research-based programs engaged the students more and were more interactive than regular programs. Ciampa (2012) completed a similar analysis of

research-based programs versus non-research-based programs and found both to be parallel to increasing literacy scores.

Reading strategies were a key component of student achievement and played a critical role in the positive learning environment for student and teacher. Shapley, Sheehan, Maloney, and Caranikas-Walker (2011) examined how incorporating reading strategies in 21 middle schools affected learning. The literacy teacher and each set of students received instructional materials, and the authors observed the frequency of reading strategies used in the classroom. The authors noted several benefits of reading strategies across the curriculum. First, students received immediate feedback from assignments, a valuable part of student learning. Second, they noted decreased behavioral problems in the classroom, a benefit for all. Further, because the use of reading strategies provided a more hands-on approach, it increased the students' readiness to learn. The authors also noted that small-group instruction was beneficial, evidenced by the achievement improvements at the end of the semester.

Aydemir and Ozturk (2012), found that reading skills also increased student confidence. Aydemir and Ozturk (2012) examined 60 students to explore how reading levels were related to reading confidence. The elementary school that participated in the study wanted to determine whether students preferred reading from a screen or from a book in cooperative learning groups. The authors collected data to determine if group work improved literacy scores compared with individual work. The authors relied on the reading instruction given by the teacher. The students were allowed to work together. The group interaction boosted the students' confidence levels and increased their reading fluency. Bashful students who improved their reading skills also showed increased self-

confidence and improved communication with their peers (Avdemir & Ozturk, 2012). Similarly, Means (2010) found that students working together built relationships more effectively. Thus, students' working together helped them become more confident in their reading fluency and comprehension.

Review of the Broader Problem

Reading scores and achievement have been a major topic of an ongoing conversation in the educational arena. Berg and Lyke (2012) conducted a study on repeated reading strategies performed by parents. The researchers stated that parents depended solely on literacy programs to teach students certain reading skills instead of enforcing what the program taught. They argued this was evidence that research-based strategies were more beneficial to the reading scores, achievement, and literacy skills. A variety of teaching and learning occurred in schools, and literacy skills varied because students had different intelligences and learning styles. Education was always evolving, and there is a need for innovative ideas. Because of this evolution, it was vital for educators to update their methods as well. Therefore, the current research study reviewed the significance of proficient readers, and foundations of reading. This case study also investigated teachers' perceptions of reading strategies, research-based instructional strategies, skills, and methods recommended by the district for reading.

Significance of Proficient Readers

Struggling readers is a term that many teachers use on a daily basis. Teachers consistently stated that some students were remedial. However, these students needed remediation from teachers, not accusations and judgement. Kibby (2009) suggested that students who needed remediation from teachers all school year did so because they had

fallen behind on basic literacy skills. Thus, they constantly tried to catch up with their peers. Therefore, various activities needed to be put in place so that struggling readers could become successful. Ortlieb (2013) developed a plan for teachers to attack the issue. The suggestions were to start from the basics of phonics and phonemic awareness, incorporate prior knowledge strategies, and build on previous experiences.

Many studies addressed the lack of reading comprehension skills and the development of reading skills in students who were not proficient, fluent readers. Hannon (2012) explored the concept of reading comprehension as a vital part of skilled reading. Hock et al. (2009) confirmed that reading comprehension was the foundation of reading. However, many students could not read fluently. The authors stated that students needed prior knowledge to fully comprehend the reading material. Fluency, word detail, and vocabulary were mastered tasks for proficient readers. Berman and Biancarosa (2009) suggested that teachers should focus on reading comprehension if they wanted students to become proficient readers and learners.

Any single component of reading can play a major part in whether or not students become proficient readers. Hudson, Torgesen, Lane, and Turner (2012) discovered that if one part of the text model, such as phoneme blending, single-word fluency, or reading comprehension, was missing, the lack hindered the child from becoming a proficient reader. Hudson et al. (2012) pointed out that struggling readers had to decode information successfully in order to become proficient readers. Teachers played a vital role in teaching students how to become proficient readers. Thus, Georgiou, Parrila, Kirby, and Stephenson (2010) studied best practices for early childhood development to determine if the instruction was critical to understanding elements of learning. The authors found that

phonics and phonemic awareness were necessary for students to comprehend reading literature. The authors suggested that teachers begin early with sight words and compose readings that are relevant to real-world scenarios. Savage and Frederickson (2011) reported that facilitation from a teacher helped improve literacy foundations by using technology for basic reading skills, such as fluency and phoneme blending.

Implications

This study aimed to understand teachers' perceptions on reading strategies, research-based instructional strategies, skills, methods, and curriculum recommended by the district for reading. This study offered insights into how to address teacher perceptions regarding the most effective learning strategies for students. These findings may convey possible project directions that could affect the district, classroom teachers, and literacy scores. Thus, the results from the data collected revealed more about what is current actions to improve reading scores of students. From prior research, research-based strategies may help increase literacy scores if teachers instruct students on how to use these literacy skills. Hence, the exploration of teachers' perceptions on reading strategies, research-based instructional strategies, skills, and methods recommended by the district for reading may develop a concurring idea to improve instruction. As a result, this researcher analyzed the themes to determine what teachers need in literacy classrooms to improve reading scores.

Summary

This study was beneficial to schools that needed to implement research-based instructional strategies to increase students' literacy scores. This case study explored teachers' perceptions on reading strategies, research-based instructional strategies, skills,

and methods recommended by the district for reading. Students with reading difficulties may also benefit from increased research-based instructional strategies in the classroom. Learning to read requires a variety of skills to become fluent and research-based instructional strategies like phonics, phonemic awareness, and comprehension skills may be the key component. Struggling readers need a variety of instructional tools to develop reading skills. Section 2 of this proposal presents the rationale of this study based on research and design.

The outcome of this study was to address the needs of various populations of struggling readers. The findings from this study also may be helpful to students, educators, and parents, to potentially provide research-based instructional strategies that are beneficial tools for improving literacy scores. Section 2 of this study includes the methodology of the study as it relates to teachers' perceptions on reading strategies, research-based instructional strategies, skills, and methods recommended by the district for reading. Section 3 provides a description of the findings of this research. Sections 4 and 5 presented the findings, conclusions, and recommendations.

Section 2: The Methodology

Introduction

The guiding principle for this study arose from the four research questions identified earlier:

RQ1: What are teachers' perceptions regarding recommended research-based instructional strategies related to reading achievement?

RQ2: What are teachers' perceptions regarding what is limiting reading achievement?

RQ3: What are teachers' perceptions regarding reading strategies implemented to improve academic achievement in reading classrooms?

RQ4: What are teachers' suggestions to improve reading achievement?

This study design chosen to explore those questions was a case study design that included interviews to obtain teachers' perceptions regarding reading strategies, research-based instructional strategies, skills, and methods recommended by the district. The participants of the study were the 7th and 8th grade reading teachers in the three middle schools of this district. The data examined derived from teacher interviews, lesson plans, minutes from teacher meetings, and archived school district recommendations. The interviews and observations focused on teachers' perceptions of reading from curriculum or grade level meetings to determine the strategies teachers used to increase reading levels in reading classrooms. Interview questions also addressed teachers' perceptions regarding research-based instructional strategies currently used to aid underachieving students. The themes that evolved from the research elicited an understanding of reading instruction for students in grades 7 and 8 in the three middle schools in this district. A triangulation of three sources of data (teacher interviews, minutes from curriculum, and

grade level meetings), as well as district recommendations highlighted the research-based instructional strategies used in the three middle schools. Additional data derived from archived district recommendations and minutes from grade level and curriculum meetings.

This researcher initially considered using a grounded theory research design for this project, centered on the data of students from a variety of computer programs. Creswell (2012) stated that a challenge to the grounded theory is the difficulty in determining how it corresponds to real world data. As a result, a case study approach that allowed themes to emerge was more appropriate than a grounded theory design. Ethnography research design would focus on the diversity of teachers, teaching styles, and complexity of meetings. Creswell (2012) described this design as being cultural, and full of norms and traditions. Teachers who have been teaching for a specific amount of years, or teachers who received the same type of training are all a part of the same culture. The reason for not choosing this design was because of the lengthy time required to collect data.

Participants

Criteria and Justification

The sample chosen was from three urban public middle schools in a single school district in the south, drawn from 7th- and 8th-grade teachers of English and Language Arts (ELA). The convenience sampling method identified prospective participants who were willing to participate in the study. The identities of the 10 teacher participants in this report appear as encoded values shown in Table 2. The table also includes information about their years of teaching experience and where they teach (S01, S02, or S03). Some

of the teachers were co-teaching pairs; Table 2 includes this information also. In addition to direct interviews with the teachers, data collected included this researcher's direct observations of focused instructional team meeting in each school, that is, meetings of grade-level or subject level teachers to discuss curriculum and other teaching issues, as well as topics involving reading instruction at a more general faculty meeting for each school.

Table 2
Information about Participants

| CodeName | Grade Taught | Years Experience | School | Teacher Teammate |
|------------|--------------|------------------|-----------|------------------|
| Teacher 01 | 8 | 2 | School 01 | Not applicable |
| Teacher 02 | 7 | 2 | School 02 | Teacher 06 |
| Teacher 03 | 8 | 7 | School 02 | Teacher 04 |
| Teacher 04 | 8 | 15 | School 02 | Teacher 03 |
| Teacher 05 | 7 | 9 | School 01 | Not applicable |
| Teacher 06 | 7 | 12 | School 02 | Teacher 02 |
| Teacher 07 | 7 | 12 | School 01 | Not applicable |
| Teacher 08 | 8 | 13 | School 03 | Not applicable |
| Teacher 09 | 7 | 9 | School 02 | Not applicable |
| Teacher 10 | 8 | 8 | School 03 | Not applicable |

The convenience sample allowed an analysis of archival data by using anonymous methods. Teacher interviews identified how they integrated research-based instructional strategies into the classroom, whether the teacher used whole or small group instruction, and other details. Perceptions from teachers regarding interventions and research-based strategies currently used with at-risk readers helped determine teachers'

attitudes and needs related to integrating research-based instructional strategies into the reading curriculum to close the achievement gap.

Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements guided the recruitment of teachers for this study. Access to teachers and the school-wide planning team derived from permission granted by the principal of each school and the district administration. Interviews followed IRB protocols to ensure the participation of participants was voluntary. In addition, the district required additional permission from the district's data representative.

For this study, the researcher interviewed 10 7th and 8th grade teachers from the district's middle school in a private location at the school after school hours. Archival curriculum guidelines in the areas of reading and research-based instructional strategies from the school district office provided more context for the data. In addition, the researcher examined minutes from grade level meetings and curriculum meetings. Interviews with teachers explored the types of computer programs chosen. Teacher interviews provided evidence of research-based instructional strategies used in the classroom.

Protection of Participants' Rights

This researcher followed all guidelines and procedures established by University's IRB for the protection of participants' rights, as well as all protocol and procedures deemed mandatory by the district. IRB approval preceded any data collection efforts. Teacher identifier codes protected their identities as indicated in Table 2 to ensure protection of the participants' rights. All data storage was in a locked file cabinet only

accessible to the researcher. Accordingly, the informed consent forms did not have any identifiers and the researcher was the only person with access to the data.

Procedures to Gain Access to Participants/Ethical Concerns

The criteria for selecting teachers were important. A convenience sampling method identified prospective teachers who were willing to participate in the study. The teachers included ten 7th and 8th grade middle school teachers from the three middle schools in this district, all of whom teach reading or are a part of the schoolwide planning team. After gaining appropriate approvals, the participants received a letter of invitation to participate. This letter explained the study, its purpose, and a brief scenario of how research would be collected (see Appendix C). The informed consent explained the participants' rights, the interview process, and clearly stated that participation was voluntary. All participants signed a consent form.

Data Collection

The case study format elicited themes developed through interviews, meeting observations, and lesson plans, providing a triangulated source of data. Creswell (2013) noted that triangulation of data from multiple sources provides corroboration of data that can shed illumination on themes and perspectives developed in the course of the study. The central purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore teachers' perceptions on reading strategies, research-based instructional strategies, skills, methods, and curriculum recommended by the district for reading. To keep all data collected confidential, data collection took place using a password-protected laptop. In-depth interviews were the primary data collected, along with teacher's lesson plans, and minutes from meetings. Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews allowed the conduct of a thorough analysis of

teachers' perceptions on research-based strategies. Open-ended questions guided the interviews and asked about the problem. The specific interview guide used appears in Appendix E of this report.

The data collection instruments included archival data, interview protocols, audio tapes, and observation sheets. The observation and interview protocols ensured that the researcher stays on task, talk less, and observe and listen more during the teacher interviews. The audiotape was an important collection instrument to ensure accuracy of participants' comments. Each interview lasted approximately 25 minutes. Merriam and Associates (2002) suggested developing a system of tracking by manually organizing the information into themes and groups that could be easily organized. The researcher, a current seventh-grade teacher, was the primary data collector, which ensured consistency of data collection techniques.

Data Analysis

Immediately after the interviews ended, the researcher immediately transcribed the recordings to ensure accuracy and detail. The researcher imported the collected data, including lesson plans and notes from faculty meetings at each participating school into a qualitative analysis software package, specifically NVivo for Mac, version 11.4.1 (2019) from QSR International. This software enabled easy coding, analysis, and understanding of a wide range of qualitative data.

Using NVivo, the researcher conducted a thorough analysis of the data collected. Hatch (2002) suggested approaching the beginning stages of inductive analysis with light boundaries rather than tightly constructed ones. This increased the opportunity to create domains that related well with each other instead of forcing concepts together. Therefore,

the analysis process was an iterative one in which initial thoughts about possible themes generated modifications and redirection based on the data collected. Historical data acted as a supplementary resource when available; to enhance the specific information on the studied population.

Limitations

One possible limitation is that teachers may not have been completely honest, particularly about concerns they may have regarding their school or their district. In addition, when speaking about their lesson plans, they may not have provided the whole story about what happens in classrooms, including information about students' engagement and teachers' enthusiasm. Some other potential limitations or weaknesses of the study include that teachers may not have taught reading skills consistently throughout the reading lessons. In other words, what one teacher did may not reflect what all teachers were doing. In the proposed study, the timeframe in which teachers used the research-based strategies and literacy skills taught also affected the data collected. Furthermore, the composition of each class differed with students with various disabilities and educational experiences. The scope and delimitations of the study resulted from using a sample of only 7th- and 8th-grade language arts and reading teachers.

The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' perceptions on reading strategies, research-based instructional strategies, skills, methods, and curriculum recommended by the district for reading. The data analysis process included the exploration of themes found from the data collection to determine how to close the achievement gap. The goal was to determine teachers' perceptions on reading strategies, research-based instructional strategies, skills, methods, and curriculum recommended by

the district for reading. Teachers' perceptions about literacy skills and methods were pivotal to this study. Moreover, this study aided in improving research-based instructional strategies, methods, and curricula used to improve reading strategies and skills in underachieving students. In other words, when teachers used effective research-based instructional strategies, methods, and curriculum, students learned reading strategies and developed skills that not only improved reading assessment scores, but also allowed them to have higher self-esteems, possess more confidence, and be better prepared for life.

Data Analysis Results

The first analysis step was to code the data for theme and concept. All comments from the interviews and meeting notes received an assessment of whether it expressed a positive, negative, or neutral statement. Neutral comments, such as an explanation of a point or a description of a reading strategy, were those considered neither positive or negative. A positive statement was one that in some way indicated a positive belief or outcome or indicated a sufficiency of support or resources. A negative statement was one that in some way explicitly or implicitly presented a criticism or complaint. All individual teacher statements and school observation notes received this positive-negative-neutral encoding.

The following research questions guided the findings of this study:

RQ1: What are teachers' perceptions regarding recommended research-based instructional strategies related to reading achievement?

RQ2: What are teachers' perceptions regarding what is limiting reading achievement?

RQ3: What are teachers' perceptions regarding reading strategies implemented to improve academic achievement in reading classrooms?

RQ4: What are teachers' suggestions to improve reading achievement?

These questions provided the framework for the presentation of the findings of this study.

In addition to the above research questions, coding the responses resulted in the emergence of some additional themes that were relevant to the subject of this study.

Discussion of those additional themes appear after an exploration of the four research questions.

Triangulation and Validation of Data

This study included three separate sources of data. The most important data source for this study was the set of interviews of the 10 7th- and 8th-grade teachers. However, significant differences also existed among the teachers based on years of experience and the school where the teachers worked. Transcripts for these interviews appear in Appendix F of this report. In addition to the teacher interviews, the school observations proved illuminating by illustrating how the administration at each school interacted with their teachers. The notes taken from the observations of both teacher-only meetings and more general teachers meetings run by the school administrators are in Appendix G of this report.

The third source of data was in the form of lesson plans. Participating teachers were asked to submit reading lesson plans for one week as part of their participation in this study. All teachers did so, though in the case of the two teaching teams, a joint lesson plan was submitted. The lesson plans were available as printouts from online forms. For

this reason they did not translate easily to the printed page and are thus not explicitly included in this report. The raw lesson plans are available on request to the researcher.

In the following discussion both interviews and school observations were found to be useful. Lesson plan data collected was far less useful than the interviews and observations, in large part because as one teacher stated, “lesson plans are really for show because you never know what you may encounter in the classroom, and people are more concerned with what is on the lesson plan than whether or not the students are learning” (Teacher 06). Teacher 10, agreed, saying, “I do not like to write them [lesson plans] because I feel like it’s more for administration than students, but I do know how to.”

Discrepant data and contradictions between teacher responses appear as part of the discussions for each of the research questions. In many cases the teachers agreed in general with each other, even when their specific examples differed. In some cases, however, the teachers were deeply divided. The sections that follow discuss those areas in detail.

In addition to dealing with discrepant data, member checks offered each participant the opportunity to confirm that the transcripts accurately presented their interviews. Each participant received transcripts via email of their interviews to ensure that the transcripts accurately reflected their words. The participants had the opportunity to correct any inaccuracies included in the transcripts. These participant-approved transcripts formed the basis for the data analysis of the interviews.

The following sections present the data and key themes that emerged from the collected data sources. The organization of the responses is that of the above research questions. A final section includes additional unanticipated themes that emerged from the

study data.

Question 1: Teacher Perceptions Regarding Recommended Research-Based Strategies

An interview question asked teachers about their perceptions of research-based instructional strategies to teach reading. This question elicited a variety of responses, but no one addressed the question in a general way. The teachers instead addressed the question by specifically citing the strategies and protocols they use in their classroom. Question 3 delved into these strategies in much more detail, where the teachers were asked about the strategies they used in the classroom.

Another part of the interview asked teachers what role research-based instructional strategies play in improving reading achievement. The responses to this question varied quite a lot. For example, Teacher 1 responded to this by saying,

I think that they're huge. The problem is that achievement is such a word that is influx a lot of times because you're basing what a student's ability is on a test maybe and maybe the test is not something that sort of jives with their background knowledge or what they know, even though they know the material but don't understand the question (Teacher 1).

Teacher 4 agreed, saying: "Students have to know what to do. Good readers need a toolbox on what they need to do when they're having an issue or when they need more insight and more clarity on what they're reading," (Teacher 4).

The interview also included questions about what roadblocks prevented teachers from implementing research-based strategies in the classroom. Teacher 1 responded with a comprehensive answer that reflected many of the teachers' thoughts:

I think that the biggest challenge...is time and the standards that we're expected to teach. We don't get dedicated reading instruction time unless we make it ourselves, unfortunately you would have to ignore the burden of a lot of the common core standards in order to actually teach reading comprehension skills and just getting students familiar with a text, especially in the context again here, where a lot of them are not growing up reading. There is so much just foundational work that needs to be done that we don't have time for (Teacher 1).

Some teachers saw reading achievement as primarily a way to do well on achievement tests in all subjects as well as reading. For example, Teacher 2 said, "Have to have the skills to do well on assessments or standards and I look at it in the regard where we using [sic] the data when we look at the children testing," (Teacher 2). Despite these responses, many teachers deflected the question and answered with something irrelevant to the interview question. Teachers often moved to a discussion of specific programs rather than address the more general question asked.

Teacher Misunderstanding

One unexpected issue arising out of this study was that a few of the teachers themselves appeared not to comprehend the questions asked in the survey. For reasons of privacy, this report does not identify which teachers made such mistakes, but the misinterpretations of the survey questions were obvious. Question 1 was the most often misinterpreted question: "In your own words, how do you define a reading problem? Please provide some examples." Some teachers interpreted this question to mean what types of problems involve reading, and the responses cited examples such as "math problems that have words in it" and "a reading problem is a question that requires

students to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information in order to correctly respond to a question or to the question.” In other words, rather than addressing the types of problems students have reading textual material, the teachers addressed homework or examination questions that required the student to read.

A further misinterpretation came with teachers who misunderstood the term “research-based strategies” and interpreted that to mean strategies the student would use when researching a question or a problem as in writing an essay or theme paper. For example, one teacher responded to the question on the classroom use of research-based strategies by saying, “Daily we'll do research-based strategies, and we do that in regards to what is done in the classroom setting, especially with data analysis.” The disturbing aspect of this is that such misinterpretations called into question the reading or listening comprehension of these teachers with. Finally, one teacher, when asked about classroom use of research-based strategies said, “unfortunately I'm not too up on the research; I need to be, but eyes on the text.” That teacher followed up by saying, “But I think ultimately there are people that are a lot smarter and a lot more informed than I am that are saying this stuff works and it should be employed regularly in the classroom.”

Summary of Responses to Question 1

Overall the teachers reiterated the importance of reading in general. Their rationales for that importance varied from reading being a foundational skill to one that simply allowed the students to do better on achievement tests in all subjects. The more disturbing finding was that the teachers themselves often did not appear to understand the question asked or deflected the question to something they appeared more comfortable discussing.

Question 2: Teacher Perceptions Regarding Low Reading Achievement

An explicit question in the interview asked teachers why they believed the district's middle grade students had low reading achievement scores. The teachers offered a number of explanations for this issue, as described here.

Reasons Teachers Give for Low Reading Success

When asked what factors teachers believed contributed to poor reading success in their students, teachers had many responses. They were allowed to identify as many factors as they liked, and with each response coded separately. Table 3 summarizes the teachers' responses by their years of experience as a teacher, categorizing their experience into less than five years of experience, between five and ten years of experience, and more than ten years of experience. The most common reason given by teachers for low reading achievement was inadequate or inappropriately used school resources, a response approximately evenly split across all experience levels.

The second most common reason cited was that children entered the 7th and 8th grade with very poor reading levels, far below grade standard. One teacher said, "They're in 8th grade and they're reading on a 1st grade to 3rd grade reading level when you get them, so that's a major challenge" (Teacher 03). Teacher 06 also commented, "I teach 7th grade but I have students in my class that read on a first or pre-prima level, and when you have a class that someone is reading second grade level and someone else is reading post 12th grade, you're boring one child while struggling to get a child to at least come up" (Teacher 06). In support of this, Teacher 10 said,

It's very difficult to work with students who are four to five grade levels behind, but as the teacher, I am still required to teach 7th grade standards. There used to

be a saying that said, “Meet the students where they are.” However, with common core, that is nearly impossible for the rigor that each student is tested on (Teacher 10).

Only teachers with five or more years of experience found students who read far below grade level to be an important problem.

Table 3

Factors Leading to Poor Reading, by Teachers' Years of Experience

| Factor Causing Low Reading Skills | <5 Yrs | 5-10 Yrs | >10 Yrs | Total |
|---|-----------|-------------|------------|-------|
| Inadequate or inappropriately used school resources | 3 | 4 | 4 | 11 |
| Poor reading level of children entering middle school | 0 | 3 | 4 | 7 |
| Lack of adult dedication to reading outside school | 3 | 2 | 0 | 5 |
| Lack of children reading at home outside school | 2 | 1 | 0 | 3 |
| Lesson plans not relevant to class | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Inappropriate use of reading strategies from district | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| Lack of practice reading on computers | 0 | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| No commitment to use strategies long enough to allow them to work | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| Teacher training inadequate for this school environment | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 |
| Lack of time in school day because of standards | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Lack of district recognition of problem | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| More skilled staff needed | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Overuse of technology by children | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Lack of student motivation | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Inappropriate teacher training | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Focus on Teaching to standardized tests | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

Less experienced teachers were more likely to cite problems with students having no adult commitment to reading outside the home, students not reading at all outside the

school day, and a lack of time in the school day to devote to reading improvement due to having to teach to required standards. The most experienced teachers noted that lesson plans were irrelevant to class functioning because of having to adapt to the actual classroom experience and a lack of teacher training that specifically addressed issues of how to deal with students whose reading levels are so far behind the rest of the class.

It is possible that teachers with less experience may believe that schools cannot correct the students' reading problems within the current school environment, or at least not solely within the school environment, while more experienced teachers may tend to look to other causes of reading problems within the school rather than in the community the children live in. This study can point to this as a potential issue but cannot definitively determine if this is true more generally.

Students Reading Far Below Grade Level

A repeated theme echoed by teachers with more than five years of experience was that students came into the classroom with much less than grade-level reading skills. One comment by Teacher 02 was particularly telling. This teacher said,

So, let's say there's a 14 year old and he can only read *Pat the Bunny*. That's why he doesn't read because he's not going to enjoy it and he's not going to connect with that (Teacher 02).

According to Random House's Little Golden Books imprint, the publisher of *Pat the Bunny*, the grade level of that book is for toddlers and pre-school children. Since Teacher 02 teaches seventh grade, the severity of the reading gap indicated by this comment is critical. Teacher 03 echoed this issue, saying,

I'll just say children reading on a lower level than the grades that they're in.

They're in 8th grade and they're reading on a 1st grade to 3rd grade reading level when you get them, so that's a major challenge (Teacher 03).

Of special concern for the teachers was the variation in reading ability of the students in a single class. Teacher 06, for example, said,

I teach 7th grade but I have students in my class that read on a first or pre-prima level, and when you have a class that someone is reading second grade level and someone else is reading post 12th grade, you're boring one child while struggling to get a child to at least come up, and even though you're doing that when it comes to state testing, all of this is on grade level (Teacher 06).

Teachers wanted the district and the schools to focus on reading in the early elementary grades instead of simply ignoring the problem and promoting children who cannot read to the next grade level. Teacher 07 expressed this very succinctly:

I think that once the district, and not only our district, but other districts as well-if they put a focus on reading and phonetic awareness at the lower levels, that would help us a lot when we get to middle school and high school, because reading goes through all subject areas. So, it's one of those core subjects that they really need to spend a little more attention to making sure that the teachers are equipped to teach it (Teacher 07).

These teachers consistently expressed frustration at the challenge of figuring out how to simultaneously teach their classes to common core standards while bringing children who could not read even close to middle-school grade levels up to the required standard.

Most telling, however, was a comment by Teacher 10, an eight-year veteran

working at School 3. This teacher claimed,

For some reason, the district does not admit that we have low achievers in reading. We really have not received any support from the district regarding the masses of students that are reading below grade level; besides the computer program they purchased called Academy of Reading and Accelerated Reader (Teacher 10).

Until the schools and the school board recognizes and admits the students have a literacy problem, no solution exists. If this teacher's perceptions are valid, the low reading achievement of the district is unlikely to improve in the near future.

Summary of Responses to Question 2

The teachers were most consistent in responding to issues of why students in the classes had poor reading achievement scores. The most common reason cited—one cited by nearly all teachers—was that school resources were inadequate or inappropriately used or allocated. Right behind that response was that students coming into the middle grade classes were woefully unprepared to do seventh and eighth grade-level reading. Several teachers commented on students in seventh and eighth grade only reading at a first grade or even pre-school level. The third very common reason cited by teachers was that students got little or no support and practice for reading outside of school. There was no teacher who disagreed with any of these three reasons, even when not explicitly stated. Teachers cited other reasons as noted above, but these three were the most common responses.

Question 3: Teacher Perceptions on Implemented Research-Based Strategies

Interview questions asked teachers about specific strategies designed to improve reading achievement scores, such as their teacher training in teaching reading, and the use of lesson plans. Other questions asked about the specific research-based strategies used in their classrooms. Teacher responses to this question addressed issues of teacher training, lesson plans, and strategies the teachers actually used in the classroom.

Teacher Training in Reading

Teacher training in literacy instruction proved an important issue to these teachers. Two teachers, Teacher 02, 2 years of experience from School 2, and Teacher 05, 9 years of experience from School 1, felt that while they received training in literacy instruction, that training was inadequate or inappropriate for the urban schools where they currently worked. Teacher 02 expressed frustration effectively by saying,

...a lot of the research that I've done and a lot of the reading I've done really would work well and be very effective in a more suburban environment where maybe students all had the foundational reading that a 7th grader should have, but everything that I'm reading, I'm having to find a way to almost scaffold it down to into something that is more applicable to the classroom that I have at the moment (Teacher 2).

Teacher 05 echoed this with a similar statement:

So, I don't think I have enough training in terms of how do I teach the current content because I'm required to teach the standards, and also continue to pull those students up. So different strategies need to be included because they are lower leveled (Teacher 05).

In other words, these two teachers believed that their training had not prepared them for the school environment they were experiencing, in particular, trying to teach seventh grade content and materials to students who barely read at first grade level. While they all expressed confidence in knowing how to teach reading to middle school students, they were far less confident in how to teach reading to young adolescents who had almost no reading skills while still trying to get the rest of the class up to common core standards.

One important aspect of the problem, as Teacher 02 pointed out above, is that the reading materials designed for early readers hold little interest to a middle-school child, making it even more difficult for the teachers to find ways to interest the children in reading. As Teacher 02 said earlier, what 14-year-old wants to read *Pat the Bunny*?

Lesson Plans

Lesson plans resulted in divergent opinions in this study. When asked about the relevance and usefulness of lesson plans, teachers in this study expressed differing opinions. All teachers expressed confidence in their ability to write lesson plans, but several participants questioned the relevance of lesson plans to the classroom. Those teachers expressed their opinions that the lesson plan was less a useful document designed to help teachers plan their classroom work, than it was a document that shown to the administration to demonstrate that the classroom was accomplishing something. For example, Teacher 02 in School 1 said, “Yes, I think I can write an effective lesson plan. I think that the question is [the lesson plan] effective in terms of reading, probably not” (Teacher 02). Teacher 04, an eighth-grade co-teacher from School 2, further noted that lesson plans are continuously evolving documents, saying,

I think I've been trained through the PD's and over the years of teaching; it comes naturally how to improve and write lesson plans and improve them as well as you go along, because each year is different; each class is different. So, you can't say I'll do this lesson plan and go in with it forever. So, each year it just continues to get better and better depending on your students and what it is that you're teaching (Teacher 04).

Teacher 08, an eighth-grade teacher from School 3 had this to say about competence in writing lesson plans:

I feel confident in my ability to compose effective lessons for strategies, which I've gained from these entities has helped me to compose and integrate the four main components of Language Arts, which would be vocabulary, reading, grammar, and writing (Teacher 08).

Despite this sense of overall competency, however, teachers also expressed the belief that lesson plans were less about improving student learning than they were about checking off a box to avoid getting into trouble. For example, Teacher 02 expanded on the ability to write lesson plans by adding,

The professional developments sessions that I've been sent to are only about satisfying the requirement to write lesson plans and that's only if we get visited by the state or in case the district "higher ups" want to come do a "gotcha moment" (Teacher 02).

In essence, Teacher 02 found lesson plans something designed more to entrap teachers who didn't do them to a specific standard than they were designed to improve student learning. Teacher 03 succinctly stated (after commenting on the ongoing weekend

training in writing lesson plans, that “I don't like lesson plans” (Teacher 03). Teacher 10 agreed with these sentiments, saying, “I do not like to write them [lesson plans] because I feel like it's more for administration than students, but I do know how to” (Teacher 10).

What Strategies Are Actually Used?

Since it is possible that seventh and eighth grade teachers might use different strategies, the information given by the teachers on the strategies they actually use to teach reading in their classrooms is presented in two sections, first the strategies of the seventh grade teachers, followed by the strategies of the eighth grade teachers. Table 4 presents the results of the seventh grade teacher strategies. Since Teacher 02 and Teacher 06 make up a single co-teaching team, their reported strategies are presented next to each other in the table for easy comparison.

The first point of interest is the dichotomy between what Teacher 02 (with two years' experience, in School 1) claimed as the strategies that were actually used compared to her teaching partner, Teacher 06, with 12 years of experience. The second point of interest was that almost no one used the same teaching techniques as any other teacher. If the teaching team of Teacher 02 and Teacher 06 were lumped together, only they were using the Accelerated Reader (AR) program in the seventh grade. The only technique used by more than one teacher was that of summarizing, used by both Teacher 05 (nine years' experience, School 1) and Teacher 09 (nine years' experience, School 2). All other techniques were used only by individual teachers with virtually no overlap in how reading was taught within the classrooms. On average, each teacher (or teaching team) used approximately three different techniques in their classroom, with Teacher 07 (12 years' experience, School 1) using four, and Teacher 05 using 3, while Teacher 09

(nine years' experience, School 2) uses 2. The outlier was Teacher 06, who was part of the School 1 team teaching duo, who claimed six different techniques.

Table 4

Factors Leading to Poor Reading, by Teachers' Years of Experience

| Factor Causing Low Reading Skills | <5 Yrs | 5-10 Yrs | >10 Yrs | Total |
|---|-----------|-------------|------------|-------|
| Inadequate or inappropriately used school resources | 3 | 4 | 4 | 11 |
| Poor reading level of children entering middle school | 0 | 3 | 4 | 7 |
| Lack of adult dedication to reading outside school | 3 | 2 | 0 | 5 |
| Lack of children reading at home outside school | 2 | 1 | 0 | 3 |
| Lesson plans not relevant to class | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Inappropriate use of reading strategies from district | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| Lack of practice reading on computers | 0 | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| No commitment to use strategies long enough to allow them to work | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| Teacher training inadequate for this school environment | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 |
| Lack of time in school day because of standards | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Lack of district recognition of problem | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| More skilled staff needed | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Overuse of technology by children | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Lack of student motivation | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Inappropriate teacher training | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Focus on Teaching to standardized tests | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

In the eighth grade there was no greater level of consistency than in the seventh grade. Table 5 presents the strategies used by the eighth grade teachers. In the table, Teacher 03 (seven years' experience, School 2) and Teacher 04 (15 years' experience, School 2) were co-teachers in their shared classroom. Once again, there was almost no overlap in terms of the classroom strategies used to teach reading, with the single

exception of scaffolding, used by both Teacher 08 (13 years' experience, School 3) and Teacher 10 (eight years' experience, School 3).

Table 5

Strategies Used by 8th Grade Teachers

| | Teacher 01 | Team Teacher 03 | Teachers Teacher 04 | Teacher 08 | Teacher 10 | Total |
|---|---------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|---------------|---------------|-------|
| Scaffolding | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Summarizing | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| 5-Ws | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Concept Mapping | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Cooperative learning | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Read Aloud in Small or Whole Group | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Analysis & Inferencing from text | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| AR-Accelerated Reader | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Chunking | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Comparing & Contrasting | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Frustration Model | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Read around the text | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Reading 180 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Research-based strategies | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| RUBIES strategy | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Sharing lesson objective with students | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |

These results shown in Table 5 provided support for a comment made by Teacher 02, who said,

I think that if the district provided a unified type of lesson plan that actually shows how to use it because each teacher, in my opinion, is doing their own thing. They're using the technology and they're using the resources but they're using it differently. So, I think the district should have a more unified way of doing so

everybody is doing it across the board the same way, to a certain extent (Teacher 02).

The years of teaching experience was neatly correlated with the number of different techniques the teacher used in the classroom. Figure 1 illustrates this relationship. The correlation between the two values was 0.857, a very strong positive correlation.

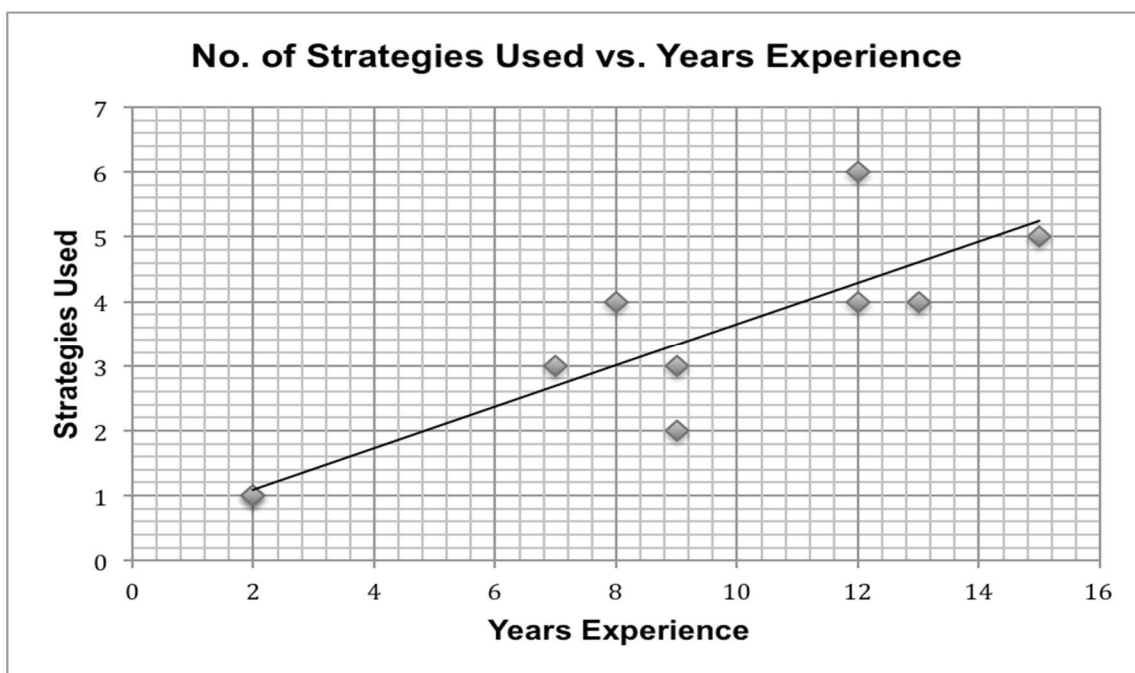


Figure 1. The reading strategies used by teachers compared to their years of experience.

Summary of Responses to Question 3

The question of what strategies teachers actually used in their classrooms was the most surprising set of responses. Virtually none of the teachers agreed on what strategies they used in their classrooms. Few strategies were part of more than one teacher's approach to reading instruction. Table 5 demonstrates that each teacher used their own set

of strategies to teach reading with very little overlap from teacher to teacher. With that said, the more experience the teacher had, the more different strategies they claimed in their responses. The most astonishing aspect of this came when the responses of the two co-teaching teams were compared. Teaching team of Teacher 2 and Teacher 6 in School 1 and teaching team of Teacher 3 and Teacher 4 in School 4 delineated their teaching strategies—and the co-teachers did not even agree on the strategies they used in their joint classroom. The responses to this question were so fractured that they implied a fractured and inconsistent approach to teaching reading in the middle school grades.

Question 4: Teacher Suggestions to Improve Reading Achievement

Another interview question asked teachers about their suggestions on how to improve overall reading achievement in the middle grades. Teachers offered a variety of suggestions. This section presents the results of those suggestions.

What Suggestions Do Teachers Have to Improve Reading Achievement?

The teachers offered several ideas to improve overall reading achievement. One key was for the district to acknowledge that there was a significant problem and then set up key strategies to address the problem. As noted earlier, Teacher 10, an eight-year veteran working at School 3, claimed, “For some reason, the district does not admit that we have low achievers in reading.”

When asked what reading strategies they felt they needed more training in, teachers’ responses ranged from vague, to all-encompassing, to quite specific. The most specific was Teacher 09 (nine years of experience, in School 2), who was open to any new strategy, saying, “there are always some additional strategies that can help any teacher,” (Teacher 09). Teacher 09 specifically requested help in incorporating graphic

organizers into the reading curriculum. Most teachers were a little more general than Teacher 09, however.

Teacher 01, a two-year veteran in School 1 stated, “Not sure of one that I want to know more about,” (Teacher 01). In contrast, Teacher 02, also a two-year veteran in School 1, said, “Research based strategies I’d like to know more about is all of them, but specifically what to do with readers who--how to engage a reader who is beyond the content level that they’re able to read,” (Teacher 02). Teacher 03, a seven-year veteran at School 02, wanted the district to come up with a common lesson plan for all teachers at a particular grade level to use because no two teachers were teaching reading using the same strategies. As Teacher 03 put it, “each teacher, in my opinion, is doing their own thing,” (Teacher 03). Teacher 05 (nine years’ experience, in School 1) echoed this by saying,

If you want to touch on certain components to ensure the kids are getting extra enrichment, as far as a particular reading skill or how to attach an ongoing skill in there, I think that could be addressed into lesson planning across the curricular in all the classes, (Teacher 05).

Teacher 03 was part of one of the two team-teaching duos, and commented that “cooperative learning is very effective” and wanted to know more about how to use that in the classroom. Furthermore, a suggestion from this teacher was:

I think that grouping students according to their Lexile levels is very helpful. The tier process—the tier 1, 2, and 3 process [sic] is very helpful with helping struggling readers. I would like to know more about how to use cooperative learning groups in the classroom effectively, (Teacher 03).

Another suggestion was to address reading across the entire curriculum that students take, including science class, math class, and so on. Teacher 05 was particularly interested in this suggestion, noting that “reading can be reinforced in the science class, while teaching the science standards, or the social studies standards, as well as the math,” (Teacher 05). Teacher 05 also wanted professional development (PD) programs to show teachers more ways to implement reading strategies throughout the curriculum in practical ways. Teacher 05 also asserted that, “The district wants to have more reading skills within the content area, but more planning needs to be done with those attending PDs.”

Teacher 06 (12 years’ experience, in School 1), had specific suggestions about what types of PD training would be helpful. This teacher said, “...at this point it’s almost saying that any training they give us would be helpful because we don’t receive any training at all,” (Teacher 06). Specifically, Teacher 06 bluntly asserted:

When it comes to the research-based strategies, our district supports things, but they only support it for a moment; they only support it for a year. We don't stick with anything long enough to see if it's going to actually work. It takes 3-5 years to see if a program is working. We have had a program in this building and I was the one teaching it. We had it for one year and it disappeared. We have had programs that we have seen documented success with but now they're only using that program with students that are reading above grade level because they want our numbers to look good, and that is something where-this is a program where it really helps but we're not using it with the students who it would help because they're more interested in looking good than helping the students, (Teacher 06).

Teacher 06 also noted that:

...we do use Academy of Reading, but I don't think that we're using it to the extent that we should, and I feel that's something that every English/Language Arts/Reading teacher needs to know more about because we can scaffold that to the student's level, (Teacher 06).

Other teachers had quite specific suggestions for further training that reading teachers needed. Teacher 07 (12 years' experience, in School 1) wanted to see PDs in how to effectively work in small groups in the classroom. Teacher 07 also noted a specific issue in PDs:

Sometimes when we go to a PD, they assume that the child already knows how to read. So, when we try to bring that back to the classroom, we still have difficulty with it because everyone is not on the same level. So, I think PD's understanding that everyone is unfortunately are on different levels in the classroom (Teacher 07).

In addition, Teacher 07 noted that PDs were less frequent than they used to be, saying,

A few years ago, we used to have a lot of PD's on different strategies to use. I see that they have slowed down on that. I do think that they are necessary for our teachers. Again, good basic, wholesome professional developments that the teachers can bring back to the classroom, (Teacher 07).

This issue also emerged in the faculty meeting observation at School 1. The meeting ended with a presenter giving depth of knowledge (DOK) instruction in constructing lesson plans. As noted in the observation notes, the teachers present

voiced concerns about how to increase rigor when students are so far below

reading level. The presenter was stunned and did not offer any suggestions or strategies on how to increase reading achievement with low performing students (School 1 Observation).

Teacher 08 echoed the need for teachers to receive PD instruction on how to deal with classes when the level of achievement of the students varied widely, including requesting help in dealing the needs of children with different learning styles and the needs of special education children mainstreamed in the classroom.

The overriding consensus in the suggestions for more training was the critical need to help teachers with strategies that will work for students with a wide range of skill levels from very early readers to those who are very advanced, when all are in the same classroom.

Summary of Responses to Question 4

Teachers had a variety of suggestions on how to improve reading achievement in the middle grades. None of the teachers cast the problem back on the elementary teachers, despite complaining that students arriving in seventh grade were often far below their grade reading level. It was surprising to note that not one teacher suggested that a greater effort in elementary schools to get all children up to grade level or close to grade level in reading achievement. When asked about what additional training would be helpful, younger teachers tended to want more training in specific reading instructional strategies, but several commented that it would be helpful to have training in how to deal with classes that had students who read at pre-school or first-grade level while also dealing with students in the same class who read at twelfth-grade level or above.

Salient Data: Other Themes Emerging from This Study

In the process of encoding the responses of the teachers to the survey and the school observation data, two unanticipated issues arose. Not all teachers raised these concerns, but both had relevance to this study. These issues were that of technology and reading, including everything from student use of smartphones and texting to the use of technology-based reading instructional systems, and the administration approach to dealing with teachers at the three different schools.

Technology in the Classroom

Teachers' opinions diverged in the highest and middle range of experience on the use of technology, with Teacher 05, one of the most experienced teachers, noting,

I think being able to read from a technology piece, if that's how they're going to be tested, they should have more exposure to that in terms of answering those particular questions. They do have computers and they go take test on them, but as far as using an iPad every day to read, or a computer to read, they don't necessarily do that (Teacher 05).

In contrast, Teacher 03, in the middle range of experience, complained,

More technology instead of it enhancing their reading, it's destroying it. So that's a big problem for me. I like technology but it's killing our babies because they don't know how to incorporate it with what they need to do better with reading (Teacher 03).

These mixed feelings about computer technology did not come from either the most inexperienced or the most experienced teachers. Teacher 03 had seven years of experience and Teacher 05 had nine years. In addition, Teacher 03 was from the most

administration-friendly school, School 2, while Teacher 05 was from the most antagonistic administration school, School 1. It is challenging to know how to interpret these polarizing views, other than to note them and mark them as individual opinions.

Negativity of Administration Attitudes Toward Teachers

A significant aspect of the school observation notes was the overall tone of the administrators' attitudes toward the teachers. Table 6 illustrates this point nicely. The table shows for each of the three school observation reports a count of the number of positive and negative responses. A significant difference in administration attitude toward the teachers appears in the frequency with which the meetings had a positive or negative slant. In School 1 the focus was overwhelmingly negative, with comments made two or about the teachers being primarily punitive.

Table 6

Positive and Negative Statements in School Observations

| School | No. of Positive Comments | No. of Negative Comments |
|----------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| School 1 | 1 | 7 |
| School 2 | 6 | 1 |
| School 3 | 0 | 3 |

In the teachers-only Focused Instructional Team (FIT) meeting at School 1 had only one negative comment expressed; the tone of that meeting was collaborative and factual—teachers discussed what worked, what didn't and identified possible strategies to overcome problems encountered. The negative comment in the FIT meeting came when the teachers discussed certain behavioral issues that “they're facing with no support from the administration.” In the more general faculty meeting, however, the tone of comments

was overwhelmingly negative. The only positive was a polite request for support from the administration regarding behavioral problems, echoing the issue raised at the end of the FIT meeting, with the administration's response being "Administration deflected the situation of support for teachers, and [redirected] the conversation to what teachers were doing wrong" (School 1 Observations). Ironically, the topic of discussion in this faculty meeting was the Positive Behavior Instructional Support (PBIS) program—a program intended to focus techniques on supporting positive behaviors with rewards rather than punishing less desirable behaviors.

In contrast to School 1, the school observation of School 2 was nearly the exact opposite. In that school observation noted six positive comments and only one negative comment in the combination of both FIT and faculty meetings. That single negative comment came at the end of the faculty meeting: "Teachers did voice a concern about having enough time during planning blocks to communicate more effectively with parents" (School 2). As negative comments go, this was quite mild compared to a number of others.

A tally of the number of positive and negative comments made by teachers, sorted by school appears in Table 7. Given the above stark differences between administration attitudes toward the teachers between School 1 and School 2, it was no surprise to discover that the teachers at School 1 expressed far more negative views in their interviews compared to teachers in the other two schools. School 2 was the only school in which teachers made more positive comments than negative ones. Teachers in School 3 split evenly between positive and negative comments.

Table 7

Positive and Negative Teacher Statements by School

| School | No. of Positive Comments | No. of Negative Comments |
|----------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Teachers at School 1 | 14 | 36 |
| Teachers at School 2 | 17 | 12 |
| Teachers at School 3 | 8 | 8 |

There may be a causality link between teacher negativity overall and administration negativity toward teachers, but it is unclear in which direction that causality link goes. That is, it was unclear if negative attitudes of teachers generated negative treatment from administrators, or whether negative treatment from administrators generated negative attitudes in teachers. The data from this study does not provide enough information to determine which of those two is more likely correct.

Another point not obvious from the table is that School 2 is the only school in this group where the teachers taught as a team. One team consisted of Teacher 02, with two years of experience, and Teacher 06, with 12 years of experience; this team teaches seventh grade. The other team at School 2 consisted of Teacher 03, with seven years of experience, and Teacher 04, with 15 years of experience; this team teaches eighth grade. Despite the disparity in the degree of experience within these two teams, these teachers remained upbeat and positive about their jobs and their students' prospects for literacy.

Summary of the Other Emergent Themes

Teachers also diverged when they addressed the issue of how helpful or harmful technology was with respect to reading achievement. A few teachers believed that technology was destructive to effective reading comprehension, while others noted that

technology-based systems were often helpful and noted that with the prevalence of technology in today's life, it was important to help children become used to reading on a computer screen instead of from the printed page.

The other issue, that of administration attitudes and processes of dealing with teachers, was even more decisive. School 1 had a principal who appeared to perceive teachers in a highly adversarial and patronizing fashion, deflecting requests for assistance on specific problems while chiding teachers for misdemeanors. School 2 had a principal almost a polar opposite, who appeared to approach relationships with teachers in a collegial and cooperative way, asking for suggestions and being open and helpful. School 3 appeared to be somewhere in the middle of these two extremes. It was unclear if the highly negative attitudes expressed by teachers in School 1 was a reflection of an adversarial relationship with their administration or if the causality went in the opposite direction.

Project Deliverables

Three key deliverables resulted from this project. The first deliverable is this report of the details of the project study and its results. The second deliverable is a PowerPoint presentation offered to the school board of the studied district summarizing the key points discovered in this project. The third deliverable is a PD program based on the research, offered to the teachers at each of the three schools, as well as the administrators. This PD program consists of three 6-hour days of training tailored for each of the three schools based on the results of this survey. The total PD program time is approximately 6 hours per school.

Data Findings Summary

This section presented the methodology and findings of this research study. The research conducted was a case study of ten 7th and 8th grade teachers in three middle schools who include reading instruction as part of their curricula. The data collected came from teacher interviews, a study of archive data, and observations and notes at curriculum meetings and more general teachers meetings at each of the three schools. The interviews and meeting notes provided insight into teacher perceptions of evidence-based reading instructional strategies. Significant issues were identified including describing why middle school teachers believe that the reading achievement scores of this district are so low, the strategies that teachers use in the classroom, the suggestions teachers have for improving reading scores, and two negative issues: an attitude of negativity on the part of some administrators toward the teachers, and a disturbing indication that some of the teachers themselves lack appropriate reading comprehension and knowledge of reading strategies that may be helpful in the classroom. The next section of this report presents details of the professional development program project including a review of the literature pertaining to the program, a description of the program, the evaluation plan and the implications of the program for local stakeholders and for social change.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

This qualitative case study purpose was to understand the issues that teachers in middle school grades face when teaching reading to their students. The approach chosen elucidated teachers' perceptions regarding various reading strategies, research-based instructional strategies, skills, methods, and curriculum recommendations from the district for reading instruction. The study included teachers who participated in team-teaching processes as well as those who did not. Participants included highly experienced teachers as well as those with only a few years of teaching experience. The goal of the project was to determine what support teachers most need for reading instruction in their classrooms to better address the problem of inadequate student literacy. Ultimately, the goal of the project is to improve student reading achievement test scores.

The outcome of this project included two presentations. One was a presentation to the administrators designed to explain the study and its results so those making decisions better understand the challenges teachers face and what those teachers feel they most need to improve student literacy in the middle grades. The second deliverable was a professional development program for teachers based on the factors identified in this study and the needs teachers expressed.

Genres of Project

The genre of this project is professional development/training curriculum and materials. The qualitative case study design allowed for an in-depth exploration of how teachers perceive the recommendations and strategies for reading instruction and what they believe they most need to improve reading instruction in the middle grades. The

intention behind this choice was to discover how to improve reading instruction and how to better support and prepare teachers to handle reading instruction in the middle grades. Ultimately, the goal was to provide a program to improve student reading skills.

Rationale

The project goals determined the choice of genre for this project. The data analysis revealed that teachers felt the need for more professional development training to assist them in providing evidence-based instruction in reading to their students, as well as developing strategies to deal with students who read far below grade level when they reach the middle school grades. Identifying an evaluation report as a genre for this study was inappropriate to meet the needs of the teachers since they articulated very clearly what they needed in the way of support, making such an evaluation redundant. Conducting a curriculum plan as a genre for the project was also inappropriate because the research questions for this study were not about the reading curricula but rather instructional strategies in general, and the middle school teachers participating in the study teach multiple subjects at multiple grade levels, with reading skills incorporated into many of those subjects. Such a curriculum plan project would be more appropriate for a task force of teachers to produce for their individual needs. Similarly, a policy recommendation genre project would not deal with the day-to-day immediate needs of the teachers. It is for this reason that this study was a professional development training program designed to inform teachers of evidence-based teaching strategies and provide them with opportunities to brainstorm with each other to develop skills and strategies needed to meet the demands of students below grade level in reading.

The literature included a variety of suggestions for instructional approaches that might improve student literacy. Carter (2016) suggested integrating technology in the instructional approach, while Wilson (2011) suggested greater emphasis on phonics, phonemic awareness, and fluency could improve reader comprehension. Edwards (2013) emphasized the importance of integrating multiple reading instruction techniques as a way of improving reading achievement test scores. With these research approaches set aside, local teachers expressed discomfort with their district having a D grade for student literacy based on standardized reading tests, and they very much want this to change to an A grade.

Review of the Literature

The results of this case study identified issues that may be impacting the students' reading literacy in this district. These findings derived from several themes. First, teachers appeared in some instances to have an inadequate understanding of research-based reading instructional approaches. Second, the teachers themselves had specific suggestions for improving reading literacy. Third, teachers perceived a negative attitude on the part of some administrators in some schools that discouraged the teachers and impacted their abilities to teach. Finally, a few of the teachers stated a lack of interest in research-based approaches and exhibited a lack of personal reading comprehension through their misinterpretation of the questions in the interview.

Method of Literature Search

The key themes in this literature review were (a) improving student literacy (considering studies specifically addressing reading in middle school students), (b) school administrator impact on teachers and/or literacy, (c) improving teacher competency in

reading instruction. A particular problem identified by the teachers was that too many of their middle grade students read far below grade level, sometimes only at a first grade or even pre-first grade level. Each of these served as the starting point for a literature review, with results limited to peer-reviewed articles published in the previous 3 years. Results focused on public school teachers. As appropriate, the search included other articles referenced in identified studies that were relevant and met the search criteria. This search used available online academic databases of professional journals.

Improving Student Literacy

When middle school students arrive in 7th or 8th grade without having learned basic reading skills, it may be useful to use reading instructional techniques designed for special education students in order to help these students improve their literacy (O'Connor et al., 2017). O'Connor et al. (2017) studied whether taking some of the time intended for history lessons to improve such students' reading skills would succeed in improving student literacy and comprehension, and whether that approach would improve overall history learning. Using a specific instructional framework that was specific to that classroom context generated improvements in reading comprehension (O'Connor et al., 2017). That framework used reading texts that addressed topics covered in the history lessons, and emphasized reading strategies as part of the history lesson. Students demonstrated improved history achievement, although O'Connor et al. (2017) were unable to determine what specific aspects of the intervention stimulated the improved history test scores.

Improving student literacy at the middle school level is different from teaching children to read in early elementary grades, particularly when, as noted by teachers in this

study, teachers taught middle grade-level subjects no matter what the reading level of the students. By middle school, many students actively started participating in extracurricular activities, something that was often associated with higher academic and literacy achievement (Hughes, Cao, & Kwok, 2016). The reasons for the association between extracurricular activities and higher academic accomplishment were unclear, though participation in sports in middle grades increased the positive impact friends have on academics, a factor that countered the more common reduction in peer support for academic engagement at the middle school level (Hughes et al., 2016). Specifically, Hughes et al. (2016) found only sports-type extracurricular activities had this positive impact on academics for middle school students. Hughes et al. (2016) found no positive impact on academics and literacy for middle grade students from their participation in arts programs or in and extracurricular clubs.

Littrell-Baez, Friend, Caccamise and Okochi (2015) noted that the use of retrieval practice can substantially improve overall reading retention and comprehension. This is a process where the teacher leads the students in close reading of a text, following that with a suggestion to provide inferences about each paragraph before going on to the next. A few days later, the students wrote short answers to a few questions about the text to practice retrieving the information learned (Littrell-Baez et al., 2015). Littrell-Baez et al. (2015) said this improved overall metacognition by up to 50%, but the study did not address the issue that students found such slow and repetitive reading practices reduced their overall engagement and willingness to read texts.

Adding literacy instruction in other disciplines was a factor in the Common Core Standards. Drew and Thomas (2017) studied how secondary science classes approached

literacy. Three key levels of literacy were integral in other disciplines: foundational literacy, or the ability to read, write and speak on science-related topics; intermediate literacy, or the ability to use literacy skills to learn about science; and disciplinary literacy, or the ability to use literacy for knowledge building (Drew & Thomas, 2017). The study found that while most science teachers taught literacy at the disciplinary level, only about one in three taught literacy at the lower intermediate literacy level, and few secondary teachers taught literacy at the foundational level, presumably assuming that students would have learned that level of science literacy in either elementary or middle school grades. Yet the current emphasis on STEM studies in the schools becomes unworkable if students leave middle school without that basic foundational literacy level in science subjects.

Guthrie and Klauda (2014) studied middle school students using a specific reading literacy program, the Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction (CORI) framework in the context of a history unit for 7th grade students. The goal was to find a way to improve students' reading comprehension and fluency. While overall comprehension improved using the CORI framework, no significant improvement appeared in fluency. The short-term nature (one month) of this study generated only a small-to-moderate improvement in comprehension, though Guthrie and Klauda (2014) suggested that a longer-term implementation would potentially generate more substantial comprehension improvements.

Another suggestion for improving middle-student literacy came from Lupo et al. (2018), who suggested increasing the challenge-level of middle-school texts in order to improve their overall reading literacy and combining supporting texts of various reading

difficulties to prepare and support students in understanding the more challenging text. Lupo et al. (2018) noted, however, that motivating students to read texts that challenge their literacy skills is an important issue, noting the importance of students to have overall positive reading experiences to encourage them to read more. To this end, Lupo et al. (2018) suggested using a three-part set of support texts arranged around a fourth challenging text targeted to meet the curriculum goals. The other three texts would include a visual text of some sort to provide background knowledge and introduce the topic. A second supporting text would include some type of informational text that increases the background knowledge needed to understand the target challenging text. The third supporting text would be a highly accessible text designed both to increase interest and vocabulary in the curriculum subject and to ensure that students experienced a positive reading experience (Lupo et al., 2018).

Park, Ambrose, Coleman, and Moore (2017) reported on a case study in which teacher-led interventions combined with computer-based writing software to assist learning-disabled students with their writing literacy. This small case study only included three middle-grade students and reported that the students' ability to write a single paragraph effectively (Park et al., 2017). The use of the software, interesting narrative prompts that encouraged imaginations, and teacher interventions resulted in the students making fewer grammatical and spelling errors while also creating paragraphs that were more focused and more consistently stayed on-topic (Park et al., 2017). However, it is unclear whether this approach would be practical or effective for larger groups of students.

Improving overall classroom environment has also been of value in improving student learning and engagement. Diperna, Lei, Bellinger and Cheng (2016) identified a positive classroom behavior program as helpful in improving student performance in some subjects. Unfortunately, reading did not explicitly improve as a result of this behavior program, although general student engagement and motivation levels were improved (Diperna et al., 2016). Specifically, studies have shown that academic enablers, which include skills and behaviors that support academic performance, impact reading performance in students (Jenkins & Demaray, 2015). These academic enablers include elements such as engagement with studies, interpersonal skills, student motivation, and study skills (Jenkins & Demaray, 2015). In a study of how academic enablers are related to reading achievement, Jenkins and Demaray (2015) found they were significantly related to every measure of literacy, including standardized test reading scores, classroom reading grades, reading fluency, and so on. Jenkins and Demaray (2015) also noted that student motivation was a function of the student's expectation of success at tasks as well as the value the student places on achieving the tasks. Thus, it may be that the most motivated students have greater parental and teacher encouragement to achieve the skills (Jenkins & Demaray, 2015). If this is valid, it implies the importance of increasing students' motivation to succeed and their expectations that they can succeed.

While native English speakers make up many of the students with poor literacy skills, it is possible that looking at middle-school students whose native language is other than English can offer insight into techniques that improve middle-school student literacy. Hwang, Lawrence, Collins and Snow (2017) studied middle-school students in California and Massachusetts originally classified as being "language minority" (LM)

students, i.e., not native English speakers, to understand their trajectory in both reading comprehension and vocabulary growth. These students received special instruction in English to help them overcome their lack of knowledge of the language. Hwang et al. (2017) found that the students experienced substantial knowledge losses over summer breaks, losing four months' growth in general vocabulary and two months' growth in discipline-specific academic vocabulary over summer breaks. This may have implications for non-LM students who have trouble with literacy, though no such studies have yet tested this suggestion. Korean middle-grade students learning English as a second language (ESL) were equally effective when emphasis occurred on either an intensive writing experience or an intensive reading experience (Lee & Schallert, 2016). In other words, they were able to learn to read by practicing writing, and they were able to learn to write by practicing reading, as long as the initial language proficiency was above a minimum basic level. Furthermore, Lee and Schallert (2016) found that those students who did extensive reading improved in reading more than those who did not; those who did extensive writing improved in writing more than those who did not. In essence, this Lee and Schallert (2016) study confirmed the importance to literacy of ensuring that students had extensive practice in the skills involved, both reading and writing. Studies with adolescent students who resettled in the U.S. from various refugee camps around the world also found that using semantic maps and connective press was a useful process in encouraging writing in students who have limited English skills (Daniel & Eley, 2018).

In addition, experience from Arabic native speakers in Israel confirmed that the greatest issues restricting development of literacy (in this case Hebrew literacy rather than English literacy) was the socioeconomic status of the students (Makhoul, 2017). In

particular, 7th to 9th grade Arabic students from the lowest (i.e., Bedouin) socioeconomic groups consistently showed the lowest scores in literacy. Makhoul (2017) noted that lower socioeconomic status students had significantly lower levels of learning motivation, fewer home resources for reading, less parental involvement in education, and lower probability of reading for leisure. Parental involvement is one aspect of importance in encouraging student literacy, with some studies showing that greater parental involvement in reading training resulting in increased literacy and student engagement (Camacho & Alves, 2016). While Makhoul's (2017) responses related specifically to Arabic students in Israel, those elements echoed results from lower socioeconomic status students in the U.S.

School Administrator Impact on Teachers and Literacy

When students had difficulty in school or had identified learning disabilities, the students' response to interventions (RTI) was a statute-mandated mechanism to determine the level of additional support that child needed for success. Maier et al. (2016) studied how well schools implemented the RTI as a way of providing students with the support they needed. That study found that school leadership style was associated with the effectiveness of RTI implementations, with transformational leadership in the administration strongly associated with positive progress in RTIs, transactional leadership styles having moderate association with positive progress. In contrast, Maier et al. (2016) found that passive/avoidant leadership styles were moderately associated with negative progress in RTI implementations. While the study primarily focused on RTI effectiveness, the results indicated an overall effectiveness of more transformational leadership to improve overall school performance, particularly with respect to students

experiencing academic difficulties. Other studies significantly support this idea, with Huguet's (2017) review of current literature finding that research identifies the most effective school leaders as those who are trustworthy and who encourage collaborative decisions and teacher leadership. Teachers who are part of such successful schools are those who are passionate about teaching and the students they teach (Huguet, 2017).

Paletta, Alivernini and Manganelli (2017) studied the relationships among the school environment, principal's leadership style, and other aspects. The researchers found that better leadership in school principals was associated with higher job satisfaction in teachers, higher self-efficacy in teachers, and better educational environment for students and teachers. Paletta et al. (2017) also noted that schools with higher overall academic success, i.e., better school context, tended to have greater job satisfaction among teachers, but that the school context did not appear to be related in any way to the leadership style and decisions of the principals. Similarly, Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015) found that faculty trust in the principal resulted in improved school achievement, a more collegial work environment, and overall community engagement. Student achievement also was directly correlated to trust, and the principal's leadership style (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). Most intriguing, principal leadership behaviors and school climate were factors that explained 75 percent of the variance in overall school achievement (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). The importance of quality leadership from school principals was a vital factor in both faculty performance and student achievement across all subjects.

Leadership styles are strongly associated with the students' perception of their school environment. Bear et al. (2017) studied how those student perceptions of the use

of praise/rewards vs. punitive actions on the part of principals impacted school climate at elementary, middle, and high school levels. Bear et al. (2017) found that ethnicity of students was strongly associated with school climate perceptions, with Asian students having the most positive assessments of school climate, and African American and multi-racial students having the poorest assessments. In addition, low socioeconomic status was associated with poor perceptions of the school climate (Bear et al., 2017). The greatest positive impact came from frequent use of praise rewards and infrequent use of punitive measures, and for student perceptions of teachers teaching social and emotional competencies—teaching students how to be good citizens, in other words (Bear et al., 2017). Further confirmation of these results comes from Dutta and Sahney (2016) who investigated the relationships among teacher job satisfaction, school climate, and leadership practices and how those factors affected student achievement in general. While Dutta and Sahney (2016) did not find a strong direct relationship between administrator leadership style and student achievement and teacher job satisfaction, the results implied an indirect positive effect of administrator transformational leadership style and teacher job satisfaction. These researchers were not able to confirm a direct impact of leadership style and student achievement.

When schools included students in the decision-making process to some extent, Voight (2015) found that students took a thoughtful role at addressing changes such as music over the public-address system after recess, anti-bullying campaigns, student class monitors, and educational field trips. Because these interventions were local rather than impacting systemic or organizational issues, school leaders were able to implement many of these. Voight (2015) also found that the result of such student participation also

improved student engagement in the school and generated good citizenship among the student body as a whole. Whether such an approach would be practical for all schools is a significant question, but the Voight (2015) study raised the issue of increased collaborative leadership including students as well as teachers and parents as contributors for improving overall student engagement which in turn improves student achievement.

Some of the most successful schools in the world are those in Finland. In a study that investigates why Finnish schools tend to be successful at increasing student achievement, Saarivirta and Kumpulainen (2016) found that schools in Finland had a relatively high degree of local autonomy in decision-making. Finnish schools also placed a very high degree of trust in school principals and teachers. In particular, Saarivirta and Kumpulainen (2016) found that Finnish principals were vital in the creation of supportive and positive working and learning environments for teachers and students.

Studies consistently found that school principals and administrators could importantly impact both teacher attitude and student achievement. For example, Mitchell, Mendiola, Schumacker and Lowrey (2016) found that specific elements of an enabling school structure impacted overall school achievement. The impacting elements included faculty trust, collective faculty and staff efficacy, and an emphasis on academics (Mitchell et al., 2016). While Mitchell et al. (2016) found these elements tended to be high in elementary schools, they noted a decline in these elements in middle schools, possibly due to greater departmentalization, greater specialization, complexity of job requirements, and reduced parental involvement in the school. Mitchell et al. (2016) recommended that school leaders could implement specific strategies to improve overall academic environment in schools, including increasing the perceptions of all stakeholders

(i.e., teachers, students, parents, administrators) that those stakeholders have a voice in decisions, that their interests be taken into consideration, and that changes made were both mutually agreed upon and made with pre-defined measurable outcomes (Mitchell et al., 2016).

Improving Teacher Competency in Reading Instruction

Reading instruction goes beyond reading assignments. Wilder and Herro (2016) found that reading instruction combined well with teaching other disciplines when using certain changes in teaching strategies. Specifically, Wilder and Herro (2016) suggested a five-step program to improve reading instruction in middle schools: (1) Use professional development to associate literacy training with instruction in various disciplines to understand what additional scaffolding students might need in their studies of that discipline. (2) Develop a collaborative learning structure using literacy coaches to support ongoing collaboration between literacy coaches and teachers in various disciplines, i.e., math, science, history, etc. (3) Combine specific learning outcomes for students and provide formative assessments to enable responsive actions to improve student literacy. (4) Make use of professional development programs to coordinate literacy frameworks across similar disciplines to generate a coordinated approach. (5) Track the progress and problems encountered in this process at both the unit and lesson levels. These five steps from Wilder and Herro (2016) provided one suggested pathway to improved student literacy in the middle grades by making it a priority across all disciplines.

Despite recommendations noted above, Kim et al. (2017) noted that rarely do programs designed to improve the literacy of struggling middle-school students achieve substantial success when transitioned from initial researchers and developers to ordinary

teachers particularly in lower socioeconomic status schools. The critical factors included the need for substantially greater student motivation and student engagement (Kim et al., 2017). Kim et al. (2017) tried to address this through the development of the STARI reading program with the intention of creating a program that simultaneously stimulated student interest and motivation while working both on word-level skills and reading comprehension. Kim et al. (2017) found that the greater the engagement in the program by the students, and the more of the program the student completed, the greater literacy and reading comprehension gains.

This brief literature review noted key elements of reading instruction: that evidence-based strategies exist to improve literacy skills in students, and that teachers need assistance and training in how best to incorporate those strategies in day-to-day teaching. In particular, Wilder and Herro (2016) emphasized the importance of providing teachers with appropriate professional development training to help them integrate literacy skills training into their teaching. Such a program would also address the issue identified by Kim et al. (2017), who noted that transitioning research evidence into teaching practice is fraught with pitfalls. The current professional development genre project aimed to start to bridge that gap by providing direct support to teachers, and by opening up a collaborative conversation among them so they can share their successes and problems with each other.

Project Description

The project that derived from this study included three parts. The first part was this current report. The second part was a presentation intended for administrators and school board personnel in the local district. That presentation explained the results of this

study, the factors identified by the teachers that impacted how they were able to teach reading literacy to their students. It also included recommendations for specific changes including greater teacher autonomy, additional professional development programs for district teachers to improve their literacy instructional skills. The third part was a three-day PD program tailored for the needs of the schools included in this project.

The PD program allowed time for participant interaction and collaborative learning. Since all schools had issues with students in middle grades who read at skill levels far below grade level, a strong focus was a set of brainstorming exercises to help the teachers come up with specific instructional strategies to address this issue. One full day addressed this issue. In addition, based on the responses of teachers from the three schools, the presentation included specifically tailored content that addressed the problems of the individual schools.

For School 1 a key focus of the PD was to encourage transformational leadership styles among the teachers as a way of modeling behaviors for the administration. Specific invitations to the administration of this school to sit in on Day 1 of the PD was intended to help them understand the importance of a more positive leadership style to create a better relationship between teachers and administrators. In addition, the PD included specific exercises on using AR reading techniques, not commonly used in this school, and other instructional skills that focused on providing students with greater context and that related the reading materials to the students' lives. For School 2, the greatest issue was to provide more practice in scaffolding techniques and concept mapping as well as cooperative learning techniques. In addition, this PD included a substantial section on brainstorming methods of dealing with students who read far below grade level. For

School 3, the PD focus included issues of scaffolding, teacher modeling, and Reading 180. In addition, the use of AR techniques assisted with reading instruction particularly for better readers in the classroom.

Resources, Supports, Potential Barriers, and Solutions

The professional development program was a three-step implementation program designed to learn and practice specific skills. Of particular note in the study responses from the teachers was the need to understand how to teach to Common Core grade-level standards when a significant number of students lack even elementary school reading competency. A second problem identified by the current study was that teachers were not always knowledgeable and aware of research-based reading instructional strategies. A third problem identified by the current study was that in some schools in the district, but not all, there existed a significant lack of trust and respect from the school administrator for the teachers. The leadership style of the administrators in these schools was distinctly dictatorial and punitive rather than collaborative and collegial. The three stages of this professional development program are thus based on learning how to integrate remedial reading instruction in a regular class, to reacquaint teachers with key literacy teaching strategies, and to learn more transformational leadership styles.

Because there are multiple reading instructional techniques that are research based and that teachers may not be familiar with, presentation of these instructional techniques occurred in different professional development training sessions. This allowed the teachers to practice the various teaching strategies and incorporate them gradually into their lesson plans. In addition, the PD program emphasized the importance of using a positive feedback, praise-based leadership style in the classroom. While the main

audience for these PD sessions was not the school administrators, the emphasis on collaboration and positive approaches to learning modeled positive and transformational leadership for principals.

The resources needed for the presentations, both to the administration and to the teachers in the PD programs, were quite simple and primarily included a room to hold the appropriate audiences, and equipment sufficient to project the PowerPoint presentations to the various audiences. Handouts of the presentations were in sufficient numbers so everyone had a copy. Some of the exercises required temporary use of currently available classroom texts in order to conduct appropriate role-play and other practice exercises. At the conclusion of the PD programs, a program evaluation form determined how effective participants believed the programs were. An additional resource was the presence and active participation of individual school administrators for the program, particularly in School 1. Additional resources required were the teachers within the district who can be identified as having specific expertise and experience in using various reading instructional strategies in the classroom. These teachers provided important real-world knowledge about the strategies and how those can be adapted to the classrooms in this district.

A key barrier in this plan was that it will take multiple professional development sessions, potentially at least three, to cover the required material. It was important that the training sessions include plenty of time to practice, role-play, and participate in exercises designed to provide guidance in incorporating the new techniques into the classroom. In addition, it required support from administration to provide the time needed to conduct the professional development programs.

A further barrier was that teachers needed support and assistance in incorporating the teaching strategies in their classrooms. Organizing teams within the school allowed teachers to brainstorm problems they encountered with their students with regard to reading instruction. This would be part of the professional development programs.

The solution to the lack of success in reading achievement in this district was two-fold. Several teachers in the survey commented that their perception was that the school board did not believe that the district had a significant reading achievement problem. The first part of the solution was in the individually tailored professional development programs to educate the teachers to provide training on specific research-based reading instructional strategies and also to provide assistance in incorporating this reading instruction for those students who read well below grade level while still teaching to the Common Core standards. A second aspect of the solution was a separate presentation to the school board to focus on both defining the scope of the problem to the school board and identify practical steps to ameliorate the problem.

Implementation Proposal and Timetable

The first stage of the project solution was to schedule and provide a three-part professional development program. This provided instruction on several fronts. Each program (a) highlighted specific reading instructional strategies and provide training, research results, and implementation suggestions for those strategies; (b) identified specific strategies for dealing with students who read far below grade level while maintaining Common Core grade-level standards; and (c) modeled and discussed positive, praise-based leadership. Part of the (b) strategy derived from the establishment of a literacy instruction support group for each school and small group

brainstorming/discussion groups to address specific issues with respect to dealing with students who need additional instruction in reading skills. Each school had presentations tailored to that school's specific needs, since each school's teachers identified somewhat different reading issues and problems.

Each school had a one-day PD program tailored specifically to the needs expressed in the research conducted in this current study. These three programs were conducted at School 1 on June 5, 2018, at School 2 on June 6, 2018, and at School 3 on June 7, 2018. Copies of the PDF slides for these presentations are included with this report as Appendix A. Specific and detailed agendas for each of these full-day sessions is included in those presentations. Teachers in the district who have experience with the included strategies, if any have that experience, were invited to participate in the presentations and add their experiences and expertise to the discussion. Because one issue raised by a number of teachers in all schools, was the issue of trying to teach students who are far below grade level in their reading skills in a mainstreamed classroom, it may also be helpful to bring in teachers with special education experience and training to assist with incorporation of these strategies in a regular classroom.

The second step of the proposal was to make a presentation to the school board to enable them to understand the scope of the problem of reading literacy in this school district. This presentation, also provided in Appendix A (Administration Presentation), focused on the scope of the problem, practical strategies to overcome the problem, and the time and resources needed to effectively address the problem. This presentation was June 12, 2018 at a regularly scheduled school board meeting. The presentation required approximately 15 to 20 minutes with a 10-minute Q&A session following. The goal of

the session was to present the importance of support for reading and literacy at all grade levels, and to identify the problems and issues that middle-school teachers have identified as contributing to the district's poor reading performance in the students. These problems require district-wide attention in order to resolve. In addition, this presentation occurred shortly after completing the three PD programs. This allowed for any important teacher feedback from those PD programs to supplement the school board presentation.

Roles and Responsibilities

The role of the researcher was to prepare the administration presentation to inform and educate the school board and any school administrators present on the vital importance of addressing the reading literacy problem in this school district. It also was important to prepare and schedule the professional development programs, drawing on the expertise of teachers within the school district who may be able to help. This included bringing in elementary school teachers and/or special education teachers to assist in identifying and discussion strategies that will be effective. In addition, it was important to establish teams within each of the schools to assist teachers in that school who may need help implementing the reading strategies.

It was important that the teachers in the district feel the strategies were relevant to their classes and their instructional situations. To this end, the training programs were as interactive as possible, including exercises such as role-playing, panel discussions, brainstorming sessions, and other active strategies to keep the teachers engaged in these programs. It was also important to get the elementary teachers engaged in the process of improving student literacy. These teachers also need contributed their expertise to the process of improving the literacy of the students in this school district.

Project Evaluation Plan

The ultimate goal of this project was to improve student literacy in this school district. This was a serious problem and not one amenable to instant or easy fixes. For this end the goal of this project was to improve the school district's literacy instruction by providing appropriate professional development training for teachers in reading instructional strategies. Ultimately, this project, if maintained for multiple years, may help bring all students up to grade level in reading skills.

The goal of this evaluation plan was to measure improvements in understanding by the teachers of the covered research-based reading instructional strategies and their confidence in utilizing those strategies in the classroom. Because the needs and desires of the three schools included in this project differed as determined by the research presented in Section 2 of this report, the three schools received different professional training programs based on those needs and desires as expressed by the teachers involved. Two kinds of evaluations were needed for this project: an evaluation of the success of the PD programs that train the teachers on research-based instructional strategies, and an evaluation of the success of the presentation to the school board and district administrators. The key stakeholders for both of these included the teachers participating in the PD program, their students, and the students' parents. Other stakeholders include the administrators of the individual schools involved and the district school board.

The learning outcomes for the PD programs were that the teachers expressed better understanding of research-based reading instructional strategies presented and more confidence in their ability to utilize those strategies in their classrooms. This outcome was measured by using a post-training evaluation that assessed their learning

and confidence in the instructional strategies presented in the PD program. This is a goal-based evaluation developed directly from the PD curriculum, but also included a formative aspect since the results of the evaluation form from each school included questions about additional training needed, and which research-based instructional strategies the teachers would like included in future PD training programs.

Acknowledgment of the school board that the district has a significant literacy problem was a key measure of success of the administration presentation.

The presentations all had the ultimate goal of improving student reading achievement in the local district by helping teachers be more effecting in reading instruction in their classrooms. It was also helpful to plan further similar PD programs once every year to continue to update teachers' reading instructional skills and add new research-based strategies as appropriate. Because this was a long-term goal likely to take years to achieve to desired student achievement levels, it was expected that the PD programs and administration presentations were projects repeated on an annual basis, using different research strategies, brainstorming new problem-solving approaches, and reporting regularly to the school board administration on the reading progress accomplished.

To evaluate the project in the near-term, each presentation of the professional development program ended with a comprehensive assessment survey of the program. Thus, while the evaluation of the current presentation was goal-based (i.e., measuring the improvement in overall confidence of teachers in utilizing the strategies presented), a formative aspect of the evaluation provided guidance for improving future PD presentations of reading strategies. In addition, a specific measure of success was that

teachers established a reading improvement team at each school to provide on-going discussions and problem-solving sessions of issues the teachers encounter in the classroom with respect to reading instruction and similar problems.

Project Implications

The results of the data showed that middle school teachers have difficult challenges to face in coping with students who lack grade-level literacy in their classrooms. The purpose of the PD programs developed was to give teachers the knowledge of evidence-based reading teaching strategies that work and to assist them in incorporating those strategies in their day-to-day teaching. Furthermore, opening a conversation about the challenges of dealing with students far below grade level in reading provided an opportunity for teachers to brainstorm solutions together and assist each other with addressing that problem in their classrooms. The result was a practical, evidence-based literacy education initiative that helped students and teachers succeed. The improvements to student literacy were not easy or rapid, but by incorporating regular professional training that focused on teaching reading strategies that were evidence-based and that were practical for today's classroom, it was expected that the overall literacy rate of the students in this district ultimately will improve.

Social Change Implications

Having students in middle school unable to read even at a first-grade level was a major problem for society in many ways. Such individuals, unless they attained reasonable fluency at some point in their lives, will become illiterate adults. Recent studies have shown, for example, that only 12% of adults in the U.S. are proficient in literacy with respect to health issues, making it very difficult for them to make informed

decisions about their own and their families' health care (Xie, 2011). Studies focused on adults who lack literacy in English in the U.S. have found associations between illiteracy falling into the economic trap of low-paying jobs and poverty, particularly for women (Lopez, 2013). Illiterate adults also placed the democratic process of the U.S. at risk (Eberly & Serber, 2013). Eberly and Serber (2013) argued the importance of education and, by implication, literacy, to sustain a healthy democracy. Literacy thus was vital to the functioning of society.

This project cannot make global changes to the literacy levels of the state or even the city. Yet, by improving reading instruction and thus increasing the literacy level of students in this district, those students could gain more opportunities for better-paying jobs, and ultimately improve their quality of life. Further, greater literacy can generate greater opportunities for these students and for the families they may ultimately form. These changes will take years to accomplish, but even the longest-term project has to start with a small, local step. In this case, that step was working hard to improve the reading achievement levels of students in this school district. This project improved the teaching methodologies of the reading instruction teachers in this district by providing those teachers with a more solid foundation in research-based reading strategies. That improvement in teaching methodologies should in turn result in improved student outcomes.

Importance of Project to Local Stakeholders

Currently, this school district had a poor record of student literacy. That means the students in this district lacked opportunities because they do not receive the education they need to be functioning, successful adults. Their parents similarly lost because their

children did not receive the education the parents' tax dollars paid for. The teachers in this district also lost because they had to teach their classes at their nominal grade level, despite the reality that substantial numbers of students in their classrooms could read at grade level. The administrators of the schools lost because they had to deal with students inept at reading when the administrators were judged on the success of those students. The school board also lost because the district as a whole underperformed expected standards, which reflected badly on the entire school board. Finally, the whole community lost because too many children reached middle-school grades without learning the essential skill of literacy, resulting in economic consequences for the entire region. One comment noted by teachers in each of the three schools studied in this project was that at least some students in their 7th- and 8th-grade classes read at grade levels far below their academic year. Those children were at risk for the consequences of adult illiteracy unless that deficit can be reversed.

Summary of the Project

This project used a qualitative case study to understand issues that teachers in middle school grades face when teaching reading skills to their students. The genre of the project was that of a professional development/training curriculum designed to fill in gaps identified in teachers' expertise in evidence-based literacy teaching techniques and to assist in group problem solving to address specific classroom issues. A brief review of the literature identified key instructional techniques and approaches that were suitable for use with middle-school students. In addition, the literature review identified administrators' effects on teachers and on student achievement in literacy. A third theme in the literature review was to identify specific techniques that could improve teachers'

effectiveness at teaching reading to middle-school students. This information led to the development of a professional development program that covered specific topics for each of the three middle school sites in the study, and addressing the specific needs of each group of teachers. This section explained the professional development program, and its evaluation process, as well as the importance of the project to all stakeholders, including teachers, administrators, the school board, parents, and students.

The following section of this report provides reflections and conclusions about this project. The section includes a discussion of the project's strengths and limitations and recommendations for alternative approaches that may be helpful in improving middle school students' reading achievement test scores. The section concludes with a series of reflections on the scholarship and leadership involved in this study, plus personal reflections about the project, suggestions for future research and a brief conclusion.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Project Strengths and Limitations

This qualitative study provided an opportunity to better understand the issues that middle school teachers face in teaching reading to their students and dealing with their lack of reading skills. This project looked at the extent of the problem from the perspective of teachers who had to deal with middle grade students who lack essential skills to get an education. While the subjects of this study were in one urban school district in Mississippi, the results may be applicable in other school districts with students in middle grades who read far below grade level. The responses of the teachers interviewed in this study emphasized their personal frustration as they tried to do their jobs effectively while struggling with major obstacles.

The greatest strength of this project was its focus on understanding the teachers' attitudes and understanding. Many assessments regarding school achievement were based solely on test scores, which often resulted in teachers receiving blame for lack of success. This study presented information from the teachers' perspective and outlined what they think they needed to better teach literacy in their classrooms. The strength of the project also was in identifying multiple sets of reading instruction strategies supported by research literature. This provided a set of strategies to educate teachers and offer them alternative mechanisms for improving their students' literacy.

A key limitation of this study was that it could not provide resources beyond those that this district already supplies. Nor was it possible necessarily to change the attitudes of administrators, even when their attitudes negatively contributed to the school climate. This was true of one school. The project could not change to the administrator in that

school except via modeling a better way to work with the teaching staff. The biggest limitation, however, was that fixing student literacy in this district was a project that demanded a number of years, not a single set of professional development programs. To achieve lasting change required ongoing commitments to improving in how teachers instruct students in reading skills.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

This project did not evaluate individual reading teaching strategies to determine which strategies are most likely to be successful in this district. An alternative approach would be to perform such an evaluation, perhaps by establishing a committee of reading instruction teachers to research and evaluate those strategies and produce a recommended strategies list. One other alternative approach would be to establish a program that brings parents into the classroom to assist with reading instruction. This approach would require finding parents with the time and educational level needed to provide appropriate levels of assistance to the students. A particular problem with this approach would be finding financial resources to recruit and train the parents to perform that instruction. While parents might be a solution, it might be possible to make arrangements with a nearby teachers' college to allow teachers-in-training to gain real world experience beyond the student-teacher experience, during which they could act as one-on-one or small-group reading tutors for students. The challenge in that is finding time within the school day for this tutoring to happen.

Scholarship, Project Development, and Leadership and Change

Conducting a qualitative study was a challenge. In particular, learning how to analyze and interpret narrative answers and interview transcripts was enlightening. The

use of NVivo software to assist in the analysis was of particular value because it enabled easy recognition of themes and concepts in the data collected. By providing multiple perspectives to consider data, offering different ways of comparing and contrasting qualitative statements and themes, and by generating linkages among the data presented, NVivo proved a helpful and effective tool in the analysis process.

Because this study was qualitative in design rather than quantitative, standard numerical analysis was inappropriate. Instead, the analysis process involved reflection and thought about what the teachers were actually trying to communicate with their answers. Working on a qualitative study thus was an exercise in reflecting on the problem and grasping the overall pattern of responses from the participants.

Most of the literature on reading strategies that I discovered was more quantitative in nature, filled with statistics. Relatively few papers provided in-depth qualitative responses and even fewer offered those responses from reading teachers as opposed to responses from students and/or parents. Thus, conducting this research provided insight about how teachers cope with the problem of teaching students below grade level literacy. As noted earlier, a few teachers felt they had a good grasp of how to deal with this literacy problem. Since this study did not correlate student achievement with specific teachers, there was no way to confirm that these teachers' students indeed were more successful than those of other teachers.

Another aspect of the project was the realization that the leadership styles of the principals of the three schools were so different. One principal was highly authoritative and exhibited an extremely negative attitude toward teachers, one was highly collaborative and presented a team approach for working with teachers, and the third

principal was in between those two extremes with a more transactional basis. The authoritative principal generated far more negativity than the collaborative principal in teacher responses.

Reflections on Importance of the Work

There is nothing more crucial to our world and country than having an educated populace, especially a populace that is literate and fluent in their literacy. This is vital to the success of the US. Thus, a key to this project was the identification of a specific professional development curriculum for this local district to improve the literacy instruction offered the students. That process can ultimately increase the literacy of the children in this area. While that will not resolve all problems in this area, it was an essential first step.

Another important goal of this study was to give reading instructors a voice to ensure that others hear and understand their problems and that have the opportunity to suggest changes that might help them become more able to teach their students effectively. All teachers interviewed in this project expressed strong caring about their students and all said they wanted to do a good job. They recounted many obstacles they had to surmount, but their desire to improve their students' literacy skills came through very clearly in their responses. Providing these teachers with a voice to express their concerns to administrators and the school board was an important part of this project.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

At best, this project will take at least 5 to 7 years to generate significant changes in the reading achievement scores of students in this district. However, the long term implications of success for this project would be a measured improvement in the lives of

the students in school district, potentially improving the economic futures and quality of life for these students. While no such project can expect to improve the lives of every single student, by improving the reading instruction in these schools, overall reading achievement of the students should increase.

Another key implication is that this project may start conversations among the teachers who provide reading instruction to students. It would be ideal if the project initiates an ongoing conversation among these teachers at all grade levels to identify effective reading instruction strategies, brainstorm solutions to problems, and improve the effectiveness of reading instruction throughout the district. Again, this is not a small target, but it is one that has the potential to improve the effectiveness of teachers and the education of students in the district.

The implications for social change were corresponding improvements in the ability of teachers to teach to Common Core standards, improvements in student literacy levels, and improvements in the students' opportunities in life. As noted earlier, illiteracy correlated with poverty and being trapped in low-paying jobs with little prospects for success. Ultimately, improving the literacy of students can improve those students' opportunities and quality of life.

Recommendations for Practice

The recommendations for future practice are first of all, that PD programs on reading instruction be an ongoing process within the district and spread to elementary schools within the district as well. New and additional research-based instructional strategies, ongoing problem-solving, and teacher networking and brainstorming ca become an annual event. Second, that each school establish reading instruction teams to

brainstorm and problem-solve with respect to issues in reading instruction. These teams, based within individual schools, should meet regularly throughout the academic year to provide assistance, support, and problem-solving sessions. Finally, a regular annual report to the school board should present the progress in reading instruction, needs of teachers in various schools, and other relevant issues. This would make the problem of low student reading achievement an important one that the school board will be able to address on a regular basis.

Conclusion

Changing the literacy levels of students in an entire school district is an important goal to aspire to. The positive impact of achieving that goal is one that can resonate for decades and can improve the lives of the people living in this district. To accomplish that requires taking a first step, educating the school board on the scope and importance of the problem, and establishing a conversation among all the teachers who provide reading instruction. That conversation can gradually change the reading literacy of the students and ultimately the citizenry of this area. The one critical thing that can make this happen is collaboration. The importance of the project lies in teachers collaborating with each other, helping each other solve problems, and educating each other on strategies that work well in this environment. This is a goal that one individual cannot solve, but a district full of teachers determined to improve student literacy can make profound changes in the lives of their students.

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Appendix A: Professional Development Program and Administration Presentation

This PD program has the purpose of providing the teachers attending with instruction on the most effective literacy teaching methods available for the students in these schools. The target audience includes the middle-school teachers who incorporate literacy skills as part of their instructional protocol. This includes reading arts teachers and also teachers of subjects such as history, science and other subjects that incorporate literacy skills in their lessons.

The key icebreaker for this PD presentation is an informal opening breakfast of coffee and muffins, during which the attendees will mingle among themselves. The program will also encourage teachers at different exercises during the day to sit and participate with teachers from other grades and/or departments. The goal of this process is not only to encourage networking among the teachers, but also to encourage discussions that can help teachers share ideas and problems with each other.

At the beginning of the formal program, each teacher will receive a Blow POP with various flavors. The flavor will determine what each person must stand and tell the group about themselves, with choices being name, school, subject(s) taught, hobbies, etc. None of the required information will be personally intrusive.

The key training materials for this PD program include several example texts taken from current curriculum material for each grade level that illustrate the teaching methods discussed in the program. These standard texts provide an opportunity to illustrate how the teaching methods used can be applied effectively using the teaching materials the teachers are already familiar with.

Evaluation of the PD Program

At the end of the training day, teachers will complete an evaluation form (included within this appendix) that will be both an evaluation of effectiveness and a formative critique that can assist with the presentation of similar future PD programs. A key element of this evaluation is the question of the teachers' intentions to implement these new teaching skills in their classrooms.

In addition, teachers will complete a similar evaluation form one month after they complete this PD program, with the difference that the follow-up evaluation will ask about whether the teachers have in fact implemented the literacy training skills, and, if not, why not. This also will help adapt further PD programs to better understand how to make the program more effective. Both evaluations will be kept short to encourage responses.

PD Program Outcomes and Objectives

The expected outcomes for this PD program are three-fold:

- The teachers will be familiar with at least one new evidence-based literacy teaching method they did not know before.
- The teachers will be comfortable with implementing at least one new evidence-based literacy teaching method in their classrooms.
- The teachers will be more aware of literacy resources available in their schools and will understand their proper use in the classroom.

Program Goals

The goals of this PD program are:

- Teachers will learn about the correct use of the available computerized

literacy programs available in their schools.

- Teachers will learn about the proper implementation of at least three evidence-based literacy training methods:
 - Scaffolding
 - Read 180 and/or AR (depending on school)
 - Engaging low-skill readers
- Teachers will work in a team environment to develop specific methods for incorporating the covered methods in their regular lesson plans.
- One or more teachers will be identified as the reading resource person for that school and each grade level. That person will either be able to answer questions and help with problem solving, or will bring those questions and problems to the attention of this researcher for assistance.
- This PD program will undergo formative adjustments, and offered every year to newly hired teachers during their orientation period.

Program Objectives

- Teachers will be able to adequately describe the characteristics of the literacy teaching methods.
- Teachers will leave with a cogent plan for incorporating those methods in their regular lesson plans.
- Teachers will understand the specific evidence that supports the efficacy of the presented literacy teaching methods.
- Teachers will have confidence that they understand and can use the

presented literacy teaching methods effectively in their classrooms.

- Teachers will have a point of contact within their school who can help with questions or problems they may have implementing literacy teaching methods in their classrooms.

Daily Schedule for the PD Program

In this schedule one day will focus on each of the three literacy methods described. The variation in the days is only by the specific method covered in that day's PD presentation. Thus, Day 1 will cover Scaffolding, Day 2 will focus on the available computer-based resources available in each school, and Day 3 will focus on engaging students who are far behind their classmates in their reading skills.

The table that follows provides a detailed breakdown of how each day of the PD program will proceed.

Table A-1 PD Program Schedule

| TIME | ACTIVITY |
|--------------|---|
| 8:00 to 8:30 | Complementary Breakfast: Muffins and coffee. General mingling. Introductions using flavored Blow POPs to guide the introductions. |
| 8:35 to 9:05 | Short Introduction. Explanation of purpose of the PD. Background information on why it is important. |
| 9:05 to 9:35 | Ice-breaker, including encouraging teachers to sit with others they do not know to encourage cross-pollination of ideas. |

| TIME | ACTIVITY |
|----------------|---|
| 8:00 to 8:30 | Complementary Breakfast: Muffins and coffee. General mingling. Introductions using flavored Blow POPs to guide the introductions. |
| 8:35 to 9:05 | Short Introduction. Explanation of purpose of the PD. Background information on why it is important. |
| 9:05 to 9:35 | Ice-breaker, including encouraging teachers to sit with others they do not know to encourage cross-pollination of ideas. |
| 9:35 to 11:30 | <p>Lectures and examples of specific literacy instruction topics, each including presentation of the quality of evidence supporting that instructional technique. Specific topics to be included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scaffolding and how to use it; applying context to make text relevant to the reader. • The use of computer-based technologies currently available in each school (i.e., Reading 180, AR). • Engaging low-skilled readers <p>A special education specialist will be encouraged to participate in this portion of the program to assist with understanding how to engage students who are far behind their classmates in reading skills.</p> <p>In addition, on Day 1, administrators from all schools will be asked to sit in on an included topic of positive leadership styles. This portion of the program is specifically aimed at the leadership of School 1 in this study.</p> |
| 11:30 to 12:30 | Lunch (independent—each teacher on their own) |
| 12:30 to 1:30 | Panel discussions. Each of the three literacy methods will be presented, one on each day. Teachers who have experience with that method will be on the panel. Teachers will be encouraged to explain how well the method works, and the problems they have encountered using that method. Questions from the other participants will be strongly encouraged. Where issues and difficulties are identified, teachers on the panel will suggest possible approaches and solutions. |

| TIME | ACTIVITY |
|--------------|---|
| 1:30 to 2:15 | After the panel presentation, the whole group will break into small groups, with no one group having more than one panel member. The goal of the group will be to discuss the method of the day and do role-play exercises to get a feel for how that method is implemented in the classroom. |
| 2:15 to 2:30 | Restroom and Snack Break |
| 2:30 to 3:15 | Brainstorming solutions. Each small group will report on the specific problems and solutions they developed in their work sessions. |
| 3:15 to 3:30 | Wrap up session: Let's Talk! Teachers will have the opportunity to ask any questions about any topic discussed during that day. Teachers will also be asked to fill out evaluation forms for the PD program. |

Appendix B. Formative Evaluation of the PD Program

Participant Name _____

School _____ Grade Taught _____

Please assess how helpful this session was for you:

(1 = Not very helpful 2 = Moderately helpful 3: Helpful)

| | | | |
|--|---|---|---|
| 1. Morning presentation of literacy methods: | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 2. Quality of Teacher speakers | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 3. Panel discussion | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 4. Small group exercise | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 5. Brainstorming solutions session | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 6. Wrap up session | 1 | 2 | 3 |

Would you recommend this PD program to another teacher? Yes No

Do you plan to incorporate today's literacy method in your classroom? Yes No

What was the most helpful part of today's session:

What was the least helpful part of today's session:

What one suggestion do you have to improve this PD program?

Appendix C: Outcome Evaluation of the PD Program

Participant Name _____

School _____ Grade Taught _____

Please answer each question carefully

1. Do you feel confident in your ability to implement today's literacy teaching method in your classroom? Why or why not?
2. Do you intend to implement today's literacy teaching method in your classroom? Why or why not?
3. Do you understand the evidence supporting today's literacy teaching method?
4. What will change in how you teach your students literacy skills as a result of this PD?

Appendix D: Follow-up Outcome Evaluation of PD

This evaluation, completed approximately one month after the PD program ends, will address whether changes in literacy instruction were actually made as a result of the PD program.

Participant Name _____

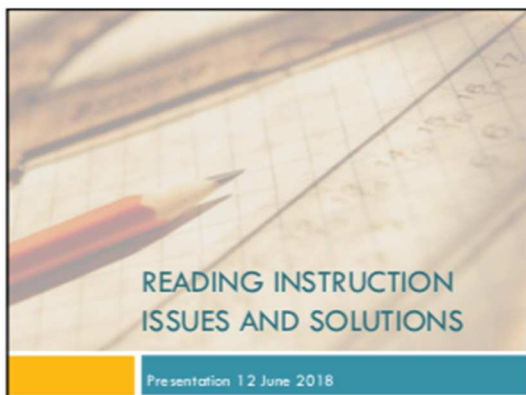
School _____ Grade Taught _____

Please answer each question carefully

1. Do you feel confident in your ability to implement the literacy teaching methods presented during the PD program in your classroom? Why or why not?
2. Have you implemented any of the literacy teaching method in your classroom? If so, which one(s)? If not, why not?
3. What has changed in how you teach your students literacy skills as a result of this PD?

Appendix E: Presentation to School Board and Administrators

The following images illustrate the Power Point slides for the presentation to the school board and administration. This presentation is approximately a 20-30 minute presentation including a question and answer period at the end.



Overview

- Reading achievement scores for middle school students are 50% below grade level.
- Students sometimes arrive in middle grades with reading skills far below grade levels.
- Many teachers do not currently implement research-based reading instruction in their classroom.
- Raising district reading achievement should be a top priority.

The Problem

- The district is currently graded "D" for reading achievement; the schools are on academic watch by the state.
- Only 23% of district schools have most children reading at or above grade level.
- The average literacy level of students is 50% below grade level.



Poor Scores Impact Morale

- Poor literacy levels mean the district is failing in its duty toward its students and their parents.

"I'm tired of being a D district in reading scores. It's time to be an A."

— Superintendent of Schools

The Bottom Line

- Reading is fundamental to all other learning. Students who cannot read will have difficulty in all other classwork.



The District's Plans to Fix Reading




- Many plans made to facilitate reading
 - Hiring consultants
 - Requiring teachers to spend extra time for remedial reading instruction
 - Implementing multiple different reading instruction systems but changing them constantly.

THE RESULT:

Reading scores in this county decreased by 10% each term from 2012 through 2014.

What Do Teachers Think?

- Teachers identify key problems.
 - Inconsistent, constantly changing reading instructional strategies.
 - Promoting children even when they cannot read.
 - Requirements to teach at grade level (i.e., 7th or 8th grade level) even when students read only at 1st or 2nd grade level)
 - Resources are sometimes
 - Inappropriate
 - Inappropriately applied to readers at wrong reading levels
 - Simply inadequate.



Study Results

- Middle school teachers participated in a case study about reading achievement.
- Four open-ended questions:
 - What do they think about the district's recommended reading instructional strategies?
 - What factors limit students' reading achievement?
 - What reading strategies are used in the classroom?
 - What suggestions do they have to improve reading?

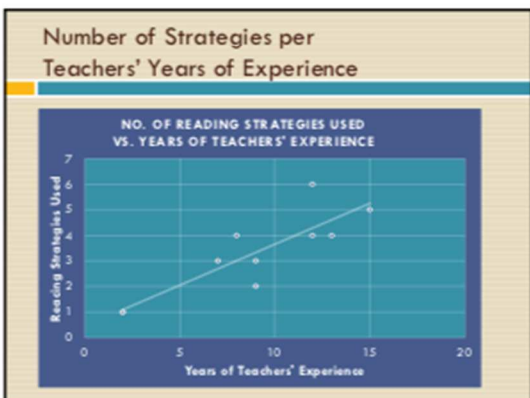
Factors Impacting Low Reading Skills by Teachers' Yrs. of Experience

| Teacher's Perceptions of Factors Causing Low Reading Skills | <5 Yrs | 5-10 Yrs | >10 Yrs | Total |
|---|--------|----------|---------|-------|
| Inappropriate or inconsistent reading instructional strategies | 3 | 4 | 4 | 11 |
| Inappropriate level of children's reading outside school | 0 | 3 | 4 | 7 |
| Lack of adult dedication to reading outside school | 3 | 2 | 0 | 5 |
| Lack of children reading at home outside school | 2 | 1 | 0 | 3 |
| Lesson plans not relevant to class | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Inappropriate use of reading strategies from district | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| Lack of practice reading on computers | 0 | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| Changing recommended strategies too quickly to allow them to be effective | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| Teacher training inadequate for this school environment | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 |
| Lack of time in school day because of standards | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Lack of district recognition of problem | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| More skilled staff needed | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Oversight of technology by children | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Lack of student motivation | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Inappropriate teacher training | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Focus on teaching to standards of tests | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

Strategies Actually Used


- AR: Accelerated Reader program
 - Used by three 7th grade teachers
 - Some stated it cherry-picks good readers and is less appropriate or not used on remedial readers
- Summarizing
 - Used by two 7th grade teachers, one 8th grade teacher
- Scaffolding
 - Used by two 8th grade teachers

No strategy than these three was used by more than one teacher per grade level. Teachers had no cohesive plan for reading instruction consistent across the district.



Key Suggestions

- Teachers need more training in research-based instructional strategies.
- Teachers need more support dealing with students far below grade level in reading.
- Teachers need school administrators to support their efforts for their students.
- Teachers need more consistent district reading instruction strategies.



Recommendations

- Provide school-specific professional development programs to help teachers become more confident using research-based reading instruction strategies.
- Establish a program for reading instruction across the district and maintain that program for several years to give it a chance to succeed.
- Encourage local school administrators to provide supportive and collegial leadership for teachers rather than dictatorial and punitive attitudes.



QUESTIONS/DISCUSSIONS

Appendix F: Letter Requesting Permission to Conduct Research

December 28, 2015

Dear Dr X X:

I am currently a student working on obtaining my Educational Doctorate Degree with a Specialization in Teacher Leadership at University. The project study is entitled “Middle School Reading Teachers’ Perspective of Research-based instructional strategies: A Qualitative Case Study.” I would like your permission to have the teachers in grades 6-8 to participate in my study. The purpose of this study is to examine teachers’ perceptions on reading strategies, recommended research-based instructional strategies, skills, and methods by the district in reading in grades 6 and 8. The answers from the research questions will help to frame a project to enhance teachers’ reading instruction to improve students’ reading skills. Individuals’ participation will be voluntary, confidential, anonymous, and at their own discretion.

Participation will include:

- Open-ended audio recorded interviews with the researcher.
- The plan is to interview each participant after school for approximately 25 minutes, the time may last longer depending upon any additional comments, or information participants may be willing to contribute regarding answers to questions.
- Each participant will receive a copy of his or her interview to check for accuracy.

Your permission will allow me to obtain a letter of data collection and letter of consent from each participant who agrees to participate in the study. Teachers’ participation in the study is voluntary and may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time.

Sincerely,

1-800-9X5-3X6X

Appendix G: Data Collection Coordination Request

Date

Dear Teacher,

I have obtained the principal's support and permission to collect data for my research project entitled "Middle School Reading Teachers' Perspective of Research-based instructional strategies : A Qualitative Case Study."

I am requesting your cooperation in the data collection process. I propose to collect data on _____. I will coordinate the exact times of data collection with you in order to minimize disruption to your instructional activities.

If you agree to be part of this research project, I would ask that you agree to a 25-minute interview answering questions about your perceptions of technology integration at the local school.

You are not required to participate with this study, "Middle School Reading Teachers' Perspective of Research-based instructional strategies : A Qualitative Case Study."

If circumstances change, please contact me via email: X@X.edu.

Thank you for your consideration. I would be pleased to share the results of this study with you if you are interested.

I am requesting your signature to document that I have cleared this data collection with you.

Sincerely,

Printed Name of Teacher

Date

Teacher's Written or Electronic* Signature

Researcher's Written or Electronic* Signature

Electronic signatures are regulated by the Uniform Electronic Transactions Act. Legally, an "electronic signature" can be the person's typed name, their email address, or any other identifying marker. An electronic signature is just as valid as a written signature as long as both parties have agreed to conduct the transaction electronically.

Appendix H: Individual Interview Guide for Teachers

Some questions might require probing and following up questions as needed for further clarification and or explanation, which might include the following:

- Can you elaborate on that concept?
- Would you offer a scenario?

Interview Guide for Individual Interviews

1. In your own words, how do you define a reading problem? Please provide some examples.
2. On a normal day of classroom instruction, what types of reading strategies do you encourage your students to use?
3. How often do you integrate research-based instructional strategies into your lessons? Illustrate some activities you use.
4. Explain the role that reading, research-based instructional strategies, and skills play in increasing reading achievement. Please provide some examples.
5. What, if any, are the challenges of integrating instructional and reading strategies into your classroom? Does your school have the resources needed to integrate instructional skills into the reading curriculum? If not, what is needed?
6. Do you believe you have been adequately trained to integrate reading strategies into your classroom? Why or why not? Do you know how to write effective lesson plans?
7. Based on your experience, what professional development training do you believe would help you to integrate research-based instructional strategies effectively in your instruction? What research-based strategies, supported by the district, do you find most helpful when working with students who are low achievers in reading? What research-based strategies would you like to know more about?
8. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Thank you for participating in this interview. I appreciate your time and cooperation. Your participation will remain confidential. Once the interview has been transcribed, you will be provided with a copy of the interview to verify accuracy.

Appendix I: Transcripts of Teacher Interviews

Participant 1

1. In your own words, how do you define a reading problem? Please provide some examples.

I define a reading problem as a disparity in phonetic awareness and chronological order. Being able to comprehend particular text, being able to actually put it in writing and actually being able to speak and listen to the literature. An example of a reading problem would be...Say for instance a student is on the 8th grade level but they're not able to understand, comprehend, or pronounce words that are on a lower level. That's going to create a problem for them because they're not going to be able to comprehend whatever that text is.

2. On a normal day of classroom instruction, what types of reading strategies do you encourage your students to use?

On a normal day, pretty much use close reading, and we do like reading with partners. Close reading is one of my favorites because it gets you to hone in on the text so you can understand different elements of the text like figurative language, different types of literary devices in the text. You're able to understand not just what the story is saying but more of how it relates to the real world.

3. How often do you integrate research-based instructional strategies into your lessons? Illustrate some activities you use.

Maybe every few weeks. One recently that was done during black history month. We incorporated informational text with noted African Americans that contributed to African American history and for some of those we did research, research based projects based on those people.

4. Explain the role that reading, research-based instructional strategies, and skills play in increasing reading achievement. Please provide some examples.

One of the research-based for students who plan on going to college-that's a very important thing to learn because if you can't read a small paragraph, you're not going to be able to read large essays or even write large essays. So you're going to have to be able to have those skills those actually reading research documents of doing reading research activities in order to write larger assignments in order to understand larger assignments.

5. What, if any, are the challenges of integrating instructional and reading strategies into your classroom? Does your school have the resources needed to integrate instructional skills into the reading curriculum? If not, what is needed?

It is difficult because literacy will always have issues. There's always going to be a disparity in literacy issues. It's always going to be a gap. So, I do think our school has enough resources in order for us to close that gap as much as we can but it's going to take more dedication from not only us at school but the other people in the kids' lives outside of school. So they just can't only read at school and think we're going to close that

literacy gap. They need to read at home, they need to have other activities that encourage literacy.

6. Do you believe you have been adequately trained to integrate reading strategies into your classroom? Why or why not? Do you know how to write effective lesson plans?

I think that I have been adequately trained to incorporate those reading strategies. I've been to professional developments on literacy and reading and other language arts components and exposed to quite a few resources that help me be qualified. Yes I know how to write effective lesson plans.

7. Based on your experience, what professional development training do you believe would help you to integrate research-based instructional strategies effectively in your instruction? What research-based strategies, supported by the district, do you find most helpful when working with students who are low achievers in reading? What research-based strategies would you like to know more about?

One of my favorites that we use is Reading 180. A lot of the testimonials that Reading 180 has it has helped a lot of people increase their literacy skills and it's one that we use and from what I've seen, it is helping our students increase their achievements. I'm Not sure of one that I want to know more about....Can you elaborate on Reading 180?--- Reading 180 is a computer based program that has different types of text on it on different types of levels and It incorporates other components of language arts and informational text and other subjects to help the students increase their achievement. It has different quizzes and tests on it and other activities. Some they may be familiar with and some they may not be and they also have instructions and stuff to help them on it and examples.

8. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Yes. With the community being involved in literacy achievement I think it is very important because students have a lot of influences outside of school and they can either be good or bad. Either way it's going to impact their lives. So I think that if the community could work closer with the schools and incorporating educational things, I think that we can move a lot faster in closing our literacy gaps.

Participant 2

1. In your own words, how do you define a reading problem? Please provide some examples.

To me, I think most simply what I would define a reading problem as is a multitude of problems. It could be the pace at which they are reading the words, it could be that they have issues decoding the words. It could be that their reading the words fluently with a good speed and you could ask them a comprehension question and they couldn't make that connection. So it's kind of a few different things put together in my mind.

2. On a normal day of classroom instruction, what types of reading strategies do you encourage your students to use?

I typically will ask them The Who, what, when, where, why, and how, the very straightforward questions. And then I'll ask them questions that do more with connecting what they already know their background to what they're reading. We also will employ what--I read a lot in a Donald and Miller, the Book Whisperer, about how one of the most effective research strategies has been shown is to just have eyes on text, to just spend time with the text. That's my main one, because I think these kids are coming from a place where they don't do a ton of reading and so eyes on the text. Get them something that they're interested in and hopefully from there, we're able to pull out more skills later on.

3. How often do you integrate research-based instructional strategies into your lessons? Illustrate some activities you use.

That was one I just mentioned the eyes on the text. We do that every day pretty much. In terms of other research based strategies, unfortunately I'm not too up on the research; I need to be, but eyes on the text. Last year when I was teaching we did a lot of highlighting, and underlining and I found research that says that's not doing much but wasting time. So we cut that out unless the students feel really comfortable with it and that's just something that they need to do psychologically. Eyes on the text, decoding words sometimes, we do strict vocabulary work just to increase the vocab, and that's about it because that's about all we have time for.

4. Explain the role that reading, research-based instructional strategies, and skills play in increasing reading achievement. Please provide some examples.

I think that they're huge. The problem is that achievement is such a word that is influx a lot of times because you're basing what a student's ability is on a test maybe and maybe the test is not something that sort of jives with their background knowledge or what they know, even though they know the material but don't understand the question. But I think ultimately there are people that are a lot smarter and a lot more informed than I am that are saying this stuff works and it should be employed regularly in the classroom. So I would have to say that it's a huge role, it's very important and it's a necessity in order to increase reading ability.

5. What, if any, are the challenges of integrating instructional and reading strategies into your classroom? Does your school have the resources needed to integrate instructional skills into the reading curriculum? If not, what is needed?

I think that the biggest challenge besides student motivation which is probably the ultimate challenge in any subject is time and the standards that we're expected to teach. We don't get dedicated reading instruction time unless we make it ourselves, unfortunately you would have to ignore the burden of a lot of the common core standards in order to actually teach reading comprehension skills and just getting students familiar with a text, especially in the context again here, where a lot of them are not growing up reading. There is so much just foundational work that needs to be done that we don't have time for. In terms of the resources, I think that we're lacking in a dedicated reading

growth, reading comprehension type movement, type campaign, where everything we do here is focused on testing and on the test scores, and when we over emphasize the testing, we're deemphasizing the foundational reading ability and you can't have one without the other. The unfortunate reality is that one takes a lot more time than the other, so that's what we're running into, that's our biggest challenge.

6. Do you believe you have been adequately trained to integrate reading strategies into your classroom? Why or why not? Do you know how to write effective lesson plans?

I don't think I've been trained adequately to teach reading in such a challenging environment as this. I think that a lot of the research that I've done and a lot of the reading I've done really would work well and be very effective in a more suburban environment where maybe students all had the foundational reading that a 7th grader should have, but everything that I'm reading, I'm having to find a way to almost scaffold it down to into something that is more applicable to the classroom that I have at the moment. Also, yes I think I can right an effective lesson plan. I think that the question is effective in terms of reading, probably not. In terms of just language arts skills, I think so. I'm really hoping thy the district can move us forward with reading PD type things.

7. Based on your experience, what professional development training do you believe would help you to integrate research-based instructional strategies effectively in your instruction? What research-based strategies, supported by the district, do you find most helpful when working with students who are low achievers in reading? What research-based strategies would you like to know more about?

The professional developments sessions that I've been sent to are only about satisfying the requirement to write lesson plans and that's only if we get visited by the state or in case the district "higher ups" want to come do a "gotcha moment". But I think what would help a lot is if we had a fundamentals of reading instruction where we were all across the district were giving things that are going to help readers at every level, that could translate to every different level. I would love to see that and I think it would make a big impact on the reading that happens here. As a result, eventually maybe not in the immediate, it will impact the test scores the way that they want to. I've seen research based strategies such as AR that has been proven through a lot of the research I've seen which has proving to be a gigantic waste of money and time. I've seen the district just sink dollars and dollars into that. I've seen them push that where there's not a ton of merit to doing that, and I don't know shay other types of things that they're doing to push reading other than a reward system, like a pizza party or candy if you score over a certain threshold on the reading. Research based strategies I'd like to know more about is all of them, but specifically what to do with readers who--how to engage a reader who is beyond the content level that they're able to read. So let's say there's a 14 year old and he can only read Pat The Bunny. That's why he doesn't read because he's not going to enjoy it and he's not going to connect with that. So, I would love to find a way to find a way to take a 14, 15, 16 year old who lacks the skills to read but still instruct them and get them

engaged in reading on something they are comfortable with. I'd like to know how to do that.

Can you elaborate on AR? Yeah, Accelerated Reader is what AR stands for and it is essentially a computer program that offers a real quick test and it's not a connections test. It doesn't test your comprehension at all. It's a recall test about a book that you read, and when you take the test and pass them you get points, and with the points at our school, you can cash those in for chips, candy, or whatever the principal is offering that month. The reward system just doesn't seem very effective, and if I'm not mistaken, the research that I've looked at and read about says that it's paying a lot of money for what you can do in your own classroom, and if you're doing it in your classroom, you have a lot more control to tailor it to your students in particular and talk more comprehension rather than recall.

8. Is there anything else you would like to add?

No, just hoping that some of these changes can be made by the new superintendent and hopefully we can apply those in the classroom, and at the end of the day we can stop worrying about achievement and start worrying more about student engagement and lifelong learning as opposed to an arbitrary test score.

Participant 3

1. In your own words, how do you define a reading problem? Please provide some examples.

For me, Reading problems would be children doing math problems that have words in it or reading problems in terms of them struggling would be them not being able to decipher words, phonic skills are weak, and therefore it creates a problem with them having to put words together, and it creates problems with them reading fluently.

2. On a normal day of classroom instruction, what types of reading strategies do you encourage your students to use?

For the most part we have to read every day. So we do read-alouds, we do where the teacher would read and pause and there will be words that the children would read as we go along. Also, strategies to understand what we've read in the text by using RUBIES , unraveling, and they're about 4 or 5 but I try to stick to one so that the children are consistently getting it. Again, that's during read alouds every day in small groups and we do whole groups and we do that probably about 20-30 minutes each day.

3. How often do you integrate research-based instructional strategies into your lessons? Illustrate some activities you use.

Daily we'll do research based strategies, and we do that in regards to what is done in the classroom setting, especially with data analysis. We have to use those. I do independent and individual reports according to the test that they take for each term. So I pull that up and we use that daily so that we can use that as closures. We also use it in the classroom setting and whole groups so the children can improve their scores.

4. Explain the role that reading, research-based instructional strategies, and skills play in increasing reading achievement. Please provide some examples.

Have to have the skills to do well on assessments or standards and I look at it in the regard where we using the data when we look at the children testing. In order for them to know anything, they have to know the skill, and I'm a skill person. I would rather do the skill first and you're able to apply it in your learning. So to me, that shows that you know the skill by your application on assessments. So I pulled those and we do those in class. Again, test items. Also I try to use technology in the classroom by using different programs like Edulastick and Ixl.com which will have each skill assigned, and it's probably about 157 of them every day for about 15-20 minutes of class time.

5. What, if any, are the challenges of integrating instructional and reading strategies into your classroom? Does your school have the resources needed to integrate instructional skills into the reading curriculum? If not, what is needed?

They do have the skill that's needed to integrate things in the classroom for skills. The children have to wholeheartedly see it and use a holistic approach. With the skills that we have, the technology works very well because that's the age we're in, so we have sources we can use. Is it available at the same time?--We have to do a lot of sharing. We do have sources, but we need s few more sources and resources to use. The challenges for the classroom would be the low rate of reading levels that we encounter because they are horrible. So I'll just say children reading on a lower level than the grades that they're in. They're in 8th grade and they're reading on a 1st grade to 3rd grade reading level when you get them, so that's a major challenge.

6. Do you believe you have been adequately trained to integrate reading strategies into your classroom? Why or why not? Do you know how to write effective lesson plans?

I have been trained well in the regard of reading. One because I've watched my colleagues over the years, and not only with the classroom but watching the training with watching your peers as you work to help you better understand what you're dealing with. It was hard for me when I first came in the classroom because I didn't know the children read so low. The training is well in that regard. I have been trained to write effective lesson plans. We have a consistent training going on, on the weekends with Ask For More to teach us how to integrate and become better at lesson plans. I do ok. I don't like lesson plans.

7. Based on your experience, what professional development training do you believe would help you to integrate research-based instructional strategies effectively in your instruction? What research-based strategies, supported by the district, do you find most helpful when working with students who are low achievers in reading? What research-based strategies would you like to know more about?

Research based strategies that we can use to better assist us is helping us as educators, is to train our parents to assists us and aid us in what we can better do with the reading

integrated from home to school. The district supports us with “Ask for More” is something we participate in, a training, once a month. They're teachers go once a month and we have teachers that go every other Saturday to build on that. So Ask for more is great. The trainings that we do have to bring the parents in works well too. We usually do that every other month at our school. Anything to incorporate helping us to better the children from parental involvement to home will help us out better in the classroom.

8. Is there anything else you would like to add?

I think this is awesome and anything about reading is great because for some reason there's a breakdown with reading with our children and this generation. I don't know why other than it's not being done. More technology instead of it enhancing their reading, it's destroying it. So that's a big problem for me. I like technology but it's killing our babies because they don't know how to incorporate it with what they need to do better with reading.

Participant 4

1. In your own words, how do you define a reading problem? Please provide some examples.

With the students, I do what I call a pretest Lexile. If they miss so many words, than I know they're having difficulty. They're not on their reading level. Not being able to comprehend what is being said or being able to answer text dependent questions. Especially comprehension wise, I realize it's a reading problem.

2. On a normal day of classroom instruction, what types of reading strategies do you encourage your students to use?

One would be chunking on a typical day. To be able to determine main idea or to comprehend what the passage is talking about. Also, the 5 w's. In my room, we're always trying to find out or be able comprehend or understand what we're reading. So these strategies help understand what you're reading. So the 5 w's help determine main idea or central idea. Another strategy that I like them to use is summarizing. Basically 25 words or less. Summarize what is that they just read. Can you elaborate on the 5 w's concept? Okay. It's Who, what, when, where, and why. If we can determine The Who, what, when, where, and why of a passage, than we could pretty much have an idea of what we read.

3. How often do you integrate research-based instructional strategies into your lessons? Illustrate some activities you use.

Basically, pretty much every day. We do a lot of informational reading. So in order to understand that, I do a lot of research based so that they can-/I tell them in order to know the main idea, I tell them we have to find stuff to back it up. And one way you cite evidence is basically research, data, time, dates, and names, so any time you're reading something informational, as research it to make sure.

4. Explain the role that reading, research-based instructional strategies, and skills play in increasing reading achievement. Please provide some examples.

Research based instructional strategies play a very important role because in order for students to be able to read and comprehend what they are reading, certain strategies need to be put in place. One that I like to use is summarizing and note taking, because again that helps with comprehension. We're always stressing comprehension because we cannot do anything if we do not understand things that we've read. Another one that I like to use is contrasting and comparing. Finding similarities and the differences between two different passages. Objectives and standards daily are used, so one thing I like to do with the students is share the objective with them so they'll have an idea of what they supposed to be doing. If they understand what they're reading for or understand why they're reading it, it's more likely that they'll do well with the questions and understand the text better.

5. What, if any, are the challenges of integrating instructional and reading strategies into your classroom? Does your school have the resources needed to integrate instructional skills into the reading curriculum? If not, what is needed?

Some of the difficulties with that is the school does not have the resources they need to use different strategies or the technology we would like to have in order to implement these strategies. So that makes it challenging because a lot of things to make reading interesting, we need technology and stuff because kids become very bored with just the plain paper and textbook type thing so if we could get more technology in the school so we can broaden the Way in which we incorporate reading daily. Then I think it would help the children enjoy reading and enjoy the work that they're going.

6. Do you believe you have been adequately trained to integrate reading strategies into your classroom? Why or why not? Do you know how to write effective lesson plans?

Yes, I think I've been properly trained. Again, the problem isn't being able to effectively implement the strategies or technology because of the lack of knowledge. It's due to the fact that we do not have the resources we need in the school system. We do have PD's on how to effectively write lesson plans. I think I've been trained through the PD's and over the years of teaching it comes naturally how to improve and write lesson plans and improve them as well as you go along, because each year is different; each class is different. So, you can't say I'll do this lesson plan and go in with it forever. So, each year it just continues to get better and better depending on your students and what it is that you're teaching.

7. Based on your experience, what professional development training do you believe would help you to integrate research-based instructional strategies effectively in your instruction? What research-based strategies, supported by the district, do you find most helpful when working with students who are low achievers in reading? What research-based strategies would you like to know more about?

I think that if the district provided a unified type of lesson plan that actually show how to use it because each teacher, in my opinion, is doing their own thing. They're using the technology and they're using the resources but they're using it differently. So, I think the

district should have a more unified way of doing so everybody is doing it across the board the same way, to a certain extent. I think cooperative learning is very effective. I think that grouping students according to their Lexile levels is very helpful. The tier process-the tier 1, 2, and 3 process is very helpful with helping struggling readers. I would like to know more about how to use cooperative learning groups in the classroom effectively. Ways to use centers especially in the middle school levels. It's kind of difficult at that stage putting centers and cooperative learning groups with that age group.

8. Is there anything else you would like to add?

No, not at this time.

Participant 5

1. In your own words, how do you define a reading problem? Please provide some examples.

For reading to me, reading is constructing meaning. So, if students can't construct with meaning from what they read, then they're actually aren't reading. So, signs of not being able to construct meaning is not showing comprehension of text, not understanding the characters, not understanding who, what, when, where, why, and how are key signs that they may not be able to construct meaning. Not being able to have key reading skills such as inferencing, visualizing, knowing what to do when you have an issue with text or you need further clarity will be issues of signs of reading.

2. On a normal day of classroom instruction, what types of reading strategies do you encourage your students to use?

On a normal day, my students are taught strategies to help them understand the text. So, we go over as we're reading to stay connected with the text. To highlight important details as they read to stay connected with the text. That's one strategy that we use. Another strategy that we use is once they read paragraphs, once they get done with the paragraphs, they are asked to write one sentence-What does the author want me to know? So, in that sense, they sort of summarize the key points of what that paragraph was talking about before they go on to the next paragraph. We also work on reading comprehension skills as far as reading and making inferences with the text. So, they get questions from a read and they're asked to make an inference about that text to help focus on reading skills.

3. How often do you integrate research-based instructional strategies into your lessons? Illustrate some activities you use.

In looking at that question and looking at some things that research has said; research has identified certain skills that students need to be able to have to be readers and that would be visualizing, making inferences, asking questions. Basically, knowing what to do when you have issues. So, in using some of those strategies that I discussed earlier, we focus trying to help them ask questions as they read in terms of what they're reading while they're reading and picking out some important details. In terms of how often, my students are giving a read every morning when they come in, so it's reinforced just about

every morning. Now we may switch up the strategy, but there is always a reading strategy in the mornings for them to do to help them become better readers.

4. Explain the role that reading, research-based instructional strategies, and skills play in increasing reading achievement. Please provide some examples.

The role that reading skills play—students have to know what to do. Good readers need a toolbox on what they need to do when they're having an issue or when they need more insight and more clarity on what they're reading. So, some students don't know how to use the skills or don't have the skills needed such as context clues. Knowing how to—when you read an unfamiliar word because often times most readers won't know what every word is, but they may have a skill to use to help them understand what an unknown word is or making inferences. So those are particular skills that students will need to be able to answer it. As far as the research goes, research shows that these skills help build readers and that's why it's good to help kids focus on these skills. Some of the best strategies are beneficial because it's shown to get the results.

5. What, if any, are the challenges of integrating instructional and reading strategies into your classroom? Does your school have the resources needed to integrate instructional skills into the reading curriculum? If not, what is needed?

To me, because so much in terms of grading on what type of readers they are or how advanced, it's computerized. So, I think within itself, I think students need more practice every day with reading from something computerized to be able to answer questions. So, I think being able to read from a technology piece, if that's how they're going to be tested, they should have more exposure to that in terms of answering those particular questions. They do have computers and they go take test on them, but as far as using an iPad every day to read, or a computer to read, they don't necessarily do that. But when it comes down to testing them, they're tested on the computer, and they have to understand how I use my inferences skills, while I'm reading it from a computer. How do I pick out the important details while I'm reading it from the computer versus having it on the paper and highlighting? Because they may have not utilized the best techniques from reading it on a computer.

6. Do you believe you have been adequately trained to integrate reading strategies into your classroom? Why or why not? Do you know how to write effective lesson plans?

With looking at some of the test scores and data, some of our kids scored below what the expectation is for what grade level they should be reading on. So, I don't think I have enough training in terms of how do I teach the current content because I'm required to teach the standards, and also continue to pull those students up. So different strategies need to be included because they are lower leveled. We need various tools, because even though the tools are there some of them may still not be reaching some of the students. So, I always try to reach and pull the latest things. And that can go back to the computers because now the age is technology based and having more access with that inside of the classroom with those students. I know how to write lesson plans effectively in terms of showing what it is what we're doing inside of the classroom. Is there a need for more

effective lesson planning? If you want to touch on certain components to ensure the kids are getting extra enrichment, as far as a particular reading skill or how to attach an ongoing skill in there, I think that could be addressed into lesson planning across the curricular in all the classes. An additional piece for ELA skill needs to be impeded.

7. Based on your experience, what professional development training do you believe would help you to integrate research-based instructional strategies effectively in your instruction? What research-based strategies, supported by the district, do you find most helpful when working with students who are low achievers in reading? What research-based strategies would you like to know more about?

Professional developments that I would like to attend more is teaching reading across the curriculum that show you how reading can be reinforced in the science class, while teaching the science standards, or the social studies standards, as well as the math. I would like to see more professional developments in illustrating that being done more to teachers because they talk about teachers doing more but it's in terms of showing activities or different ways that they can present information to students that would be beneficial. The district wants to have more reading skills within the content area, but more planning needs to be do with attending those professional developments.

8. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Not at this time.

Participant 6

1. In your own words, how do you define a reading problem? Please provide some examples.

A reading problem is anything that is hindering a child to be able to learn through reading. Some examples of a reading problem include trouble with comprehension, decreased fluency, and the inability to be able to read the words.

2. On a normal day of classroom instruction, what types of reading strategies do you encourage your students to use?

I encourage my students to do paired shared reading. That way they have one or two partners that they're reading to so that they can help each other along, and I also have rules set in place where they cannot correct a person before the person actually tries to read the word. I do a lot of modeling. We have novels, but I actually have the novels being read to through audio to the students so that they can hear while they're seeing what the word is and they can also hear how it's supposed to sound as far as fluency.

3. How often do you integrate research-based instructional strategies into your lessons? Illustrate some activities you use.

One of the things that I do in my class is teacher modeling. I will read something to the students and then we will read it as a class. I think that works as far as them hearing the fluency. We also do graphic organizers in order to be able to comprehend what we're

reading and one of the ones that the students love is the close reading model where they have to actually read the passage 3 times and they're learning what it is they need to look for by doing that. The strategies that we use it depend on the class. Some classes it's every time we meet. We only meet every other day and with the other classes, my non reading classes, my actual English/Literature classes-the way that we do that is, it's at least once a week. It depends on how long it takes us to get through a particular standard and that particular passage.

4. Explain the role that reading, research-based instructional strategies, and skills play in increasing reading achievement. Please provide some examples.

Students end up-when they can actually see that they're achieving-and one way that we do that is by using the STAR program and Accelerated Reader. When they are able to use that and they can actually see the results and see how they are achieving and see how they are progressing towards their goal. Once they see that, it actually is a positive in the classroom because that gives them the motivation they need to keep on going instead of giving them demotivation by frustrating them at all times.

5. What, if any, are the challenges of integrating instructional and reading strategies into your classroom? Does your school have the resources needed to integrate instructional skills into the reading curriculum? If not, what is needed?

One of the main challenges is the fact that students in the classes are on so many different levels. Another challenge is the fact that we have students that come to us-for example, I teach 7th grade but I have students in my class that read on a first or pre-prima level, and when you have a class that someone is reading second grade level and someone else is reading post 12th grade, you're boring one child while struggling to get a child to at least come up, and even though you're doing that when it comes to state testing, all of this is on grade level. So, we're doing all this integrating the strategies and everything, but it does not help when it comes down to the end of the school year and they have to pass that state test. Our school has the ability to integrate the instructional skills into the curriculum, but they choose to focus on their things. We are not using our resources in the way that we can, and we should. What is needed? We need more skilled staff, and we need priorities that are set and worked toward.

6. Do you believe you have been adequately trained to integrate reading strategies into your classroom? Why or why not? Do you know how to write effective lesson plans?

I feel that I have taken the initiative to make sure that I am adequately trained to integrate reading strategies and skills. That is not something that is focused on, and if a teacher does not find their own sources of professional development in order to get their training, it's usually a flight of fight syndrome. I do know how to write effective lesson plans, but one thing that we've learned is that lesson plans are really for show because you never know what you may encounter in the classroom, and people are more concerned with what is on the lesson plan than whether or not the students are learning.

7. Based on your experience, what professional development training do you believe would help you to integrate research-based instructional strategies effectively in your instruction? What research-based strategies, supported by the district, do you find most helpful when working with students who are low achievers in reading? What research-based strategies would you like to know more about?

The professional development training that I believe would be most helpful at this point it's almost saying that any training they give us would be helpful because we don't receive any training at all. When it comes to the research based strategies, our district supports things, but they only support it for a moment; they only support it for a year. We don't stick with anything long enough to see if it's going to actually work. It takes 3-5 years to see if a program is working. We have had a program in this building and I was the one teaching it. We had it for one year and it disappeared. We have had programs that we have seen documented success with but now they're only using that program with students that are reading above grade level because they want our numbers to look good, and that is something where-this is a program where it really helps but we're not using it with the students who it would help because they're more interested in looking good than helping the students. One of the programs that I know has worked over the years is the Read 180 program, and at this point, our building interventionists are using that program, but they picked the highest achieving students to actually use it. That defeats the purpose of even having the program at all. With Read 180, you have the high interest, low read ability books that the students would want to read but we're just not using it in the right way. A program that we had that only lasted for one year was the Voyager, that's with Voyager Sopers? I've taught that as well as I've taught Read 180 in the past, and with that program, the intent was good, but it wasn't meant for students on the middle school level because it could not hold their attention. The ones that I would like to know more about -we do use Academy of Reading, but I don't think that we're using it to the extent that we should, and I feel that's something that every English/Language Arts/Reading teacher needs to know more about because we can scaffold that to the student's level.

8. Is there anything else you would like to add?

No, I think I pretty much covered everything.

Participant 7

1. In your own words, how do you define a reading problem? Please provide some examples.

A reading problem to me is a student who can't comprehend what they read. The fluency aspect may be there, but if they cannot give me details about what they read or just the general content about what they read, that's what I'll identify as a reading problem.

2. On a normal day of classroom instruction, what types of reading strategies do you encourage your students to use?

We do quite a bit of reading strategies, but one of the ones that I use the most is chunking. That's where if we have, especially at this grade level, the text are pretty long;

we'll take a piece of the text and we'll break it up to try to understand what's the main idea of the story, what's the setting of the story. Trying to pick out who our characters are in the story, to better help us with the comprehension of the story. I kind of utilize a lot of them all into one. There's not really one in particular one. I still do vocabulary and phonics instruction even while we're reading. So, we use thy as a strategy. I also like for them to skim as well because a lot of our students doesn't like to read long text, so I tell them let's skim; let's read the first 2 or 3 lines in each paragraph. On the sides, note take a little bit what's it about, let's hit the questions and then we use the questions to go back to locate the answer. So, it's a lot of different techniques that I use. It just depends on the type of assignment we're working on.

3. How often do you integrate research-based instructional strategies into your lessons? Illustrate some activities you use.

Almost everything-some of the things I just mentioned to you are research based. Close text, chunking, all of those are research based. Small groups, one on one. I pretty much incorporate those every day at some level. Some days we might do it a little bit longer than others, but every day I am incorporating some kind of research based strategy in the classroom.

4. Explain the role that reading, research-based instructional strategies, and skills play in increasing reading achievement. Please provide some examples.

Well, here's the thing; students will be reading for the rest of their lives, and unfortunately at this level we do see students who may have a problem with fluency, but most of it is comprehension. So, constantly teaching some of those skills like I mentioned earlier, and doing it every day is repetition. Those are things that will eventually increase their reading. One thing I try to explain to my kids is-let me take it back-sometimes in textbooks or test, the stories are not pleasing to the students. It's hard to teach them a skill when they don't even like what they're reading. So i try to make sure they learn the skill and not necessarily the story. So, I'll pull something that they're interested in; a basketball article or for my girls-somebody that they like, and then let's actually go over the skill of reading. Let's take one or two, a paragraph or two, stop-summarize. Once you do that as a repetition, the skill is being imbedded in them. They're being taught the skill and don't even realize it, and once you teach the skill they can apply it to anything else that they read in their future.

5. What, if any, are the challenges of integrating instructional and reading strategies into your classroom? Does your school have the resources needed to integrate instructional skills into the reading curriculum? If not, what is needed?

Honestly, and this is definitely not to toot my own horn or anything because I truly do love reading and language arts, so I really don't have any challenges. When I have students that have their challenges, I just always go another route to try to teach them, or when I put them in their small groups; it's always at some level that I can reach them and we just work from there. If there is was an overall challenge, again, it would just be the comprehension but integrating those reading strategies into the classroom isn't a problem;

sometimes I have to scaffold it and bring it to their level. The school does have resources that I need to be able to do that in to the curriculum.

6. Do you believe you have been adequately trained to integrate reading strategies into your classroom? Why or why not? Do you know how to write effective lesson plans?

Yes, I do believe that I've been adequately trained to integrate reading strategies into the classroom. I've been to several PD's, and again just my years of experience of trial and error. You learn things talking to veteran teachers when I started. Yes, I do know how to write an effective lesson plan.

7. Based on your experience, what professional development training do you believe would help you to integrate research-based instructional strategies effectively in your instruction? What research-based strategies, supported by the district, do you find most helpful when working with students who are low achievers in reading? What research-based strategies would you like to know more about?

Any professional development training that I think would help with strategies effectively in my classroom will again be anything that would help teachers learn how to do small groups, learn how to scaffold those who are struggling. Sometimes when we go to a PD, they assume that the child already knows how to read. So, when we try to bring that back to the classroom, we still have difficulty with it because everyone is not on the same level. So, I think PD's understanding that everyone is unfortunately are on different levels in the classroom. The district does a pretty okay job with research based strategies. Not so more now than they used to. A few years ago, we used to have a lot of PD's on different strategies to use. I see that they have slowed down on that. I do think that they are necessary for our teachers. Again, good basic, wholesome professional developments that the teachers can bring back to the classroom. I can't think of one off the top of my head that I would like to know more about, but I'm always looking at new strategies, new things that come out; I subscribe to a few reading organizations so when they have new techniques I can use in the classroom, I'll try to utilize those. So, I'm always open for new things, but nothing in particular off the top of my head that I would like to know more about.

8. Is there anything else you would like to add?

No, that's pretty much it. The only little piece that I'll add is, I think that once the district, and not only our district, but other districts as well-if they put a focus on reading and phonetic awareness at the lower levels, that would help us a lot when we get to middle school and high school, because reading goes through all subject areas. So, it's one of those core subjects that they really need to spend a little more attention to making sure that the teachers are equipped to teach it.

Participant 8

1. In your own words, how do you define a reading problem? Please provide some examples.

A reading problem is a question that requires students to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information in order to correctly respond to a question or to the question. For instance, a student may be required to utilize context clues in order to determine what a word means based on that particular context.

2. On a normal day of classroom instruction, what types of reading strategies do you encourage your students to use?

The students are required to make predictions, inferences about a text based on analyzing text features such as the title, illustrations, headings, or captions. Students may be also required to analyze the text structure in order to determine the organization of the text.

3. How often do you integrate research-based instructional strategies into your lessons? Illustrate some activities you use.

I usually integrate research based strategies into my lessons approximately 2-3 times a week depending on whether I am teaching new objectives or re-teaching. Scaffolding is used during both introductory lessons as well as remediation. The Frayer Model and word maps are often used in order to help students to determine what unfamiliar words mean as well as the KWL chart. KWL, you can determine the kids prior knowledge and also determine whether they are understanding what's being taught.

4. Explain the role that reading, research-based instructional strategies, and skills play in increasing reading achievement. Please provide some examples.

Research based strategies help students to better comprehend what they're reading. Utilizing the Frayer Model assist students in having a deeper understanding of the vocabulary which will in turn help them to understand the text.

5. What, if any, are the challenges of integrating instructional and reading strategies into your classroom? Does your school have the resources needed to integrate instructional skills into the reading curriculum? If not, what is needed?

Yes, my school does provide resources for instructional strategies. However, the biggest challenge is probably addressing the academic needs of a surplus of students who struggle with reading as well as accommodating inclusion students.

6. Do you believe you have been adequately trained to integrate reading strategies into your classroom? Why or why not? Do you know how to write effective lesson plans?

I have received professional development in ELA in lesson planning for my school district, MS Department of Education as well as educational consulting groups. I feel confident in my ability to compose effective lessons for strategies, which I've gained from these entities has helped me to compose and integrate the four main components of Language Arts, which would be vocabulary, reading, grammar, and writing.

7. Based on your experience, what professional development training do you believe would help you to integrate research-based instructional strategies effectively in your instruction? What research-based strategies, supported by the district, do you find most helpful when working with students who are low achievers in reading? What research-based strategies would you like to know more about?

I believe professional development training in differentiated instruction will be most helpful to me. Being able to accommodate the needs of different learning styles, as well as SPED students will be a great help. The district provides both the AR programs and Academy Reading programs for struggling readers and that has been proven to be effective.

8. Is there anything else you would like to add?

No.

Participant 9

1. In your own words, how do you define a reading problem? Please provide some examples.

I will define a reading problem as the inability to comprehend or make sense of information that is gathered from a text. Anytime students aren't able to comprehend or identify key details from a passage, then those are students that I would say have a reading problem.

2. On a normal day of classroom instruction, what types of reading strategies do you encourage your students to use?

I like to utilize 2 reading strategies. One is the text connections where the students relate the text to themselves, the text to other text, and also text to the world-when they make real world connections to make sense of the reading. Also, the SSQ when the students stop, summarize, and question. They derive their own questions based on the information that they've read in the text, and they also develop their own summaries.

3. How often do you integrate research-based instructional strategies into your lessons? Illustrate some activities you use.

This is something that we try do daily so students form habits of utilizing research based strategies. Usually in the class starter, the students will have a short passage where it may require them to access prior knowledge and then they're required to use one of the two strategies previously discussed.

4. Explain the role that reading, research-based instructional strategies, and skills play in increasing reading achievement. Please provide some examples.

Well reading, the more the students do it, the more they read effectively, the better they get. Also, using the research based instructional strategies helped them become more proficient readers. Lastly, the skills that the students use increase their abilities to read.

So, when we read, the goal is for the students to become better readers. The more they do it, the strategies that they use and just practice improving those skills, is how I believe the reading achievement will increase.

5. What, if any, are the challenges of integrating instructional and reading strategies into your classroom? Does your school have the resources needed to integrate instructional skills into the reading curriculum? If not, what is needed?

Since I teach Language Arts, integrating reading into curriculum, or into my daily lessons, don't pose a challenge. I do feel that the school has the necessary resources to assist me with integrating those skills into the curriculum. What I would like to see more is a reduction in the amount of benchmarks or district assessments just to give more time for classroom instructions, and not so much of focus on the test, but building those reading skills.

6. Do you believe you have been adequately trained to integrate reading strategies into your classroom? Why or why not? Do you know how to write effective lesson plans?

Yes, I believe I have been adequately trained. Teaching language arts, reading goes hand in hand with that subject so it's almost a non-negotiable to have the reading skills in my lesson plans. I do feel that I've been trained through professional development and job alike trainings on writing lesson plans, and of course over 9 years, I've improved on my lesson plan writing skills, so, yes.

7. Based on your experience, what professional development training do you believe would help you to integrate research-based instructional strategies effectively in your instruction? What research-based strategies, supported by the district, do you find most helpful when working with students who are low achievers in reading? What research-based strategies would you like to know more about?

The professional development training that I found most useful was one called the Model School's Conference. That's a conference that we go to annually that uses high performing schools and high poverty areas and they illustrate how they're able to sustain, and it's because they have a focus on the curriculum, not so much of the socioeconomic status of the students that they serve. But they focus on providing high quality education to all their students and they use some of the research based strategies that we try to implement within our district. The research based strategies that are supported by the district are the two that were outlined earlier; the SSQ where the students stop, summarize and question, and text connections where they reference their own experiences where they compare the text to themselves, text to text (other text that they've read) and text to world (real world problems and things of that nature). As far as knowing more about strategies, I'm open. I think there are always some additional strategies that can help any teacher. I would like to attend a reading professional development to learn more strategies. One that I think may be beneficial would be graphic organizers. I could implement those more, I think.

8. Is there anything else you would like to add?

I think one component of reading and reading comprehension that's lacking is writing. I think if students are given the opportunity to write more and not so much scripted writing, which is creative writing, where they utilize their own thoughts. Of course, they would be forced to use grade level vocabulary, and then I think the reading achievement would increase dramatically.

Participant 10

1. In your own words, how do you define a reading problem? Please provide some examples.

I believe a reading problem is defined as difficulty decoding words, has difficulty recalling basic facts, or should I say difficulty with basic comprehension and a lack of vocabulary on grade level. Some examples may include students reading on a first to second grade level, but they're in the 7th grade. Another example is students not being able to comprehend the text that they read, because in essence, they do not understand the words in the text.

2. On a normal day of classroom instruction, what types of reading strategies do you encourage your students to use?

On a normal day of classroom instruction, I incorporate a reading strategy called read around the text. The students have to read everything around the text, such as the titles, charts, graphs, captions, pictures, headings, and read the first and last lines of each paragraph for more information. The students ask themselves questions about everything that they have looked at around the text before they actually read the text. As a team, we work together to use this strategy in each curriculum, like science, social studies as well as math.

3. How often do you integrate research-based instructional strategies into your lessons? Illustrate some activities you use.

I try to integrate research-based instructional strategies into my lessons at least 3 times a week. Some activities that I use include cooperative learning, scaffolding instruction, and concept mapping. Cooperative learning is used during independent practice and I incorporate centers to make this strategy "come to life" sort of speak. Students work together to compose certain elements in a story or text. After they read around the text, students draw pictures to illustrate what the vocabulary word mean to them. In addition, when I scaffold instruction, I try to use a variety of techniques to meet the needs of all students and cater to all learning styles. Concept mapping is used as research based instructional strategy that has been proven to be effective. One of the most popular ones I used is the KWL chart.

4. Explain the role that reading, research-based instructional strategies, and skills play in increasing reading achievement. Please provide some examples.

Reading, research-based instructional strategies have been proven to be effective and successful. The strategies that I use on a daily basis help increase reading achievement. Unfortunately, so many students have a deficit in reading which makes reading achievement very difficult. An example would be when I scaffold instruction into the

lesson and the lightbulb will go off in the student's mind. I see the students start to understand the text better and then can produce more quality work when I "tap into" their learning styles. It's an incredible thing to see when it actually does happen.

5. What, if any, are the challenges of integrating instructional and reading strategies into your classroom? Does your school have the resources needed to integrate instructional skills into the reading curriculum? If not, what is needed?

The challenges of integrating instructional and reading strategies into my classroom are the working with the low achievers in reading. It's very difficult to work with students who are four to five grade levels behind, but as the teacher, I am still required to teach 7th grade standards. There used to be a saying that said, "Meet the students where they are." However, with common core, that is nearly impossible for the rigor that each student is tested on. I do feel like the school has the resources needed to integrate instructional skills into the reading curriculum, but I believe a lot of the resources are not used for its purpose.

6. Do you believe you have been adequately trained to integrate reading strategies into your classroom? Why or why not? Do you know how to write effective lesson plans?

I do feel as though I have been adequately trained to integrate reading strategies into my classroom because I have taken the initiative to do what I need to, to be successful. When I first started off teaching, there were so many things that I didn't know this field entailed, but with the help of veteran teachers, I learned a lot about teaching in general, as well as integrating reading strategies with students who are not on grade level. Yes, I do know how to effectively lesson plans. I do not like to write them because I feel like it's more for administration than students, but I do know how to.

7. Based on your experience, what professional development training do you believe would help you to integrate research-based instructional strategies effectively in your instruction? What research-based strategies, supported by the district, do you find most helpful when working with students who are low achievers in reading? What research-based strategies would you like to know more about?

One professional development training that I believe would help teachers integrate research-based instructional strategies effectively in my instruction would be a basic training on which strategies are most useful and helpful to students who are not on grade level. Basically, how to reach students that are so far behind and their reading ability suffers. For some reason, the district does not admit that we have low achievers in reading. We really have not received any support from the district regarding the masses of students that are reading below grade level; besides the computer program they purchased called Academy of Reading and Accelerated Reader. The research based strategies that I would like to know more about include KIM vocabulary, reciprocal teaching that is effective, and nonlinguistic representations.

8. Is there anything else you would like to add?
No, I think I covered it all.

Appendix J: Notes from School Meeting Observations

Observation at School 1 (5 Participants at this school)

FIT (Focused Instructional Team) Meeting Topics:

4 way Frayer Model was discussed with titles such as Successes, Challenges, Solutions, and who Assistance was needed from. Teachers discussed Common assessments and whether students were mastering the concepts taught that week in English/Reading and Math. Teachers discussed the standards taught for that week, and analyzed standards and whether students achieved the intended learning outcome. Teachers also discussed new interventions to incorporate for the week such as peer tutoring, elective tutorial, small group and whole group instruction, exit tickets, and graphic organizers. Review collaboration in language arts/reading and math. Teachers discussed a great deal of behavior issues that they're facing with no support from administration.

Faculty Meeting Topics:

Administration discussed areas of concern with teachers such as being on time for work, actively supervising students, and lesson plans. Teachers asked for support on behaviors which will in turn, help aid an increase in academic achievement. Administration deflected the situation of support for teachers, and reflected the conversation to what teachers were doing wrong. PBIS strategies were discussed, and teachers voiced their concerns about the PBIS reward store is not open consistently. A mini effective lesson planning professional development was given. The presenter, which was a language arts interventionist, showed teachers some poorly written lesson plans. The presenter discussed DOK (Depth of Knowledge) words that should be written throughout the lesson plan. This should ensure the proper rigor that should be incorporated in the lesson

plans. Teachers actively participated in the professional development, but also voiced concerns about how to increase rigor when students are so far below reading level. The presenter was stunned and did not offer any suggestions or strategies on how to increase reading achievement with low performing students. This mini professional development concluded the meeting.

Observation at School 2 (3 Participants at this School)

FIT (Focused Instructional Team) Meeting Topics:

Student learning and data was discussed, with the focus of instruction should be driven by data. Administration wanted to know how the data is being used. The administration then discussed instruction and how teachers should use effective instructional practices, such as collaboration. Also, during the FIT meeting, I noticed teachers brought their curriculum binders that have pacing guides, calendars, blueprints, frameworks, alignments, professional development information, as well as feedback from administrative walk through. During the FIT meeting, teachers worked collaboratively on creating common lesson plans. Teachers created the common assessment first, and then created their lesson plans to reflect the rigor from the assessment. They began with the end in mind. To end the FIT meeting, each teacher said something positive about instruction to encourage other teachers.

Faculty Meeting Topics:

The meeting was called to order by the administrative team. First, the administrative discussed team effectiveness. They posed several questions such as (How can we support each other? Are we implementing instructional strategies? Are we following the school initiatives and improvement plans, as well as the 10 non-negotiables?) Surprisingly, the

administration wanted to know what was working, what was not working, and wanted the teachers to share some success stories that happened during the week. Towards the end of the faculty meeting, the teachers collaborated on student behaviors such as discipline and attendance. The administrative team ended the meeting and brought up one final concern on how often teachers should communicate with parents. Teachers did voice a concern about having enough time during planning blocks to communicate more effectively with parents.

Observation at School 3 (2 participants at this School)

FIT (Focused Instructional Team) Meeting Topics:

Common assessment review collaboration in language arts/reading and math. Data analysis by standard and student achievement. Remediation and re-teaching strategies that were not mastered. Discipline analysis-when did behaviors peak during the day.

Faculty Meeting Topics:

Actively supervising students in main areas of concern, such as the cafeteria, hallway, and elective areas (gym, band hall). PBIS (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports) methods to help aid the discipline analysis in FIT meetings. Effective lesson planning (how to write them and appropriate rigor). Classroom management tools, and how to be consistent with practices and routines. Research based teaching strategies such as collaborative learning, small grouping, whole group discussions, and questioning to check for understanding.